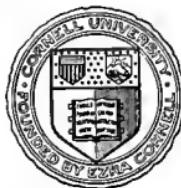


The MOTOR MAIDS' SCHOOL DAYS

KATHERINE STOKES



CORNELL
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY



GIFT OF
Carol Kammen

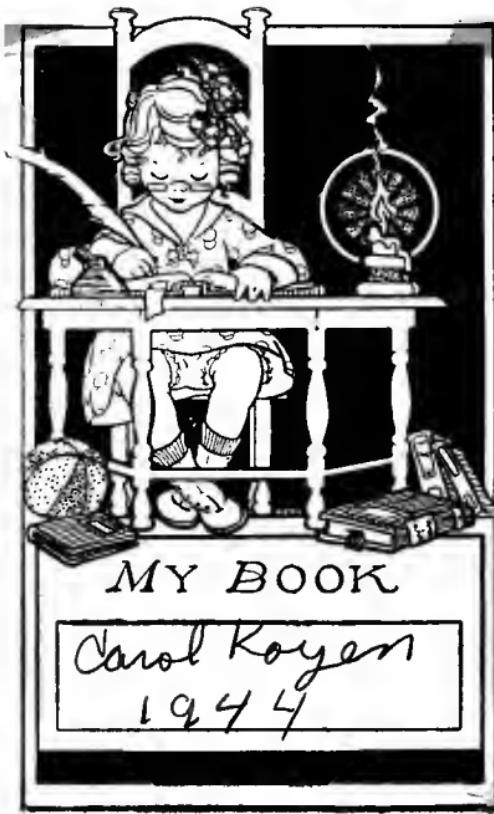
Cornell University Library
PZ 7.S87M9

The motor maids' school days,



3 1924 006 799 443

URIS





Cornell University
Library

The original of this book is in
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in
the United States on the use of the text.



"YOU WILL SIMPLY BE AN OUTCAST IN WEST HAVEN, AND I ADVISE YOU TO THINK THE MATTER OVER."

THE MOTOR MAIDS' SCHOOL DAYS

BY

KATHERINE STOKES



NEW YORK
HURST & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

Copyright, 1911,
BY
HURST & COMPANY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. "THE COMET"	5
II. FRIENDS IN NEED	24
III. THE MUSICIANS OF BREMEN	41
IV. PLOTS AND PLANS	52
V. THE FIRST MOTOR PICNIC	63
VI. THE BOX OF TROUBLES	81
VII. THE FIRE	95
VIII. NANCY'S HOME	110
IX. AT THE SIGN OF THE BLUE TEA POT .	128
X. RUMORS AT SCHOOL	136
XI. SEVEN LEAGUE ISLAND	147
XII. THE STORM	166
XIII. WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS	179
XIV. THE HALLOWE'EN HOUSE PARTY . .	193
XV. THE GHOST PARTY	206
XVI. A STRAY GHOST	217

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVII. MRS. RUGGLES	228
XVIII. FANNIE ALTA	241
XIX. MARY BEFORE HER JUDGES	253
XX. MISS CAMPBELL WEARS BLACK	262
XXI. THE MISSING LINK	271
XXII. THE REFUGEES	280
XXIII. BELLE'S CONFESSION	291
XXIV. OUT OF THE MISTS	303

THE MOTOR MAIDS' SCHOOL DAYS

CHAPTER I.

“THE COMET.”

“Girls, in about ten minutes you’re going to have the surprise of your lives,” cried Nancy Brown, joining a group of her friends at the High School gate.

“What is it, Nancy? Do tell us, please,” cried half a dozen voices at once.

“No, you must wait,” answered Nancy. “If I told you what it was, I wouldn’t enjoy seeing your faces when the thing happened.”

“Nancy, you have always got some mystery on foot,” put in her most intimate friend, Elinor Butler. “Is this one animal, vegetable, or mineral?”

“Fine or superfine?”

"Can it speak?"

"Is it as large as a house?"

"Don't all talk at once," exclaimed Nancy. "I'll tell you this much. It's animal and it's superfine. And"—she wrinkled her brows—"and it's mineral, too, I suppose."

"Superfine? At least it's a woman, then?" cried all the girls in a chorus.

"Yes," laughed Nancy, who loved nothing better than to excite the curiosity of her friends to the utmost and then launch a genuine sensation into their midst.

"Does the superfine animal wear the mineral?" demanded Elinor.

"No, she doesn't wear it. She's in it."

"In it? How strange," exclaimed another girl. "Perhaps it's a lady oyster in her shell."

"There's no surprise in an oyster unless there's a pearl in it, goosey," teased Nancy. "But here it comes! Here it comes!" she cried, clapping her hands joyfully, while six pairs of eyes peered curiously down the street, which, by gentle degrees, became a country road. The trim sidewalks of the little seaport town of West Haven became

grassy paths and the pretty lawns broadened into flat green meadows.

Far down the road a brilliant red object could be seen approaching. It was enveloped in a cloud of dust and it moved with great rapidity.

“Why, it’s nothing but a red automobile,” cried Elinor, in disappointment.

“Yes,” admitted Nancy, “it’s an automobile, but there’s something unusual about it besides its color.”

“A girl is running it,” announced Mary Price, whose clear, dark eyes always seemed to be looking into the distance. “A girl is running it, and no one is with her, and——”

But the motor car was now in full view. It was a graceful little machine large enough to hold five or six people comfortably, its body painted a warm and pleasing shade of red, its cushions upholstered in a slightly darker shade which harmonized perfectly with the red of the body. A young girl, sitting on the front seat, was running the car as easily and steadily as an experienced chauffeur. Making a graceful curve, she turned into the driveway which led to the

school grounds and presently drew up under a large shed, where people were in the habit of hitching their horses and vehicles on Field Day, or when football was in season.

"Who is she?" demanded Nancy's school-mates in a whisper.

"Why, she's Miss Helen Campbell's cousin, Wilhelmina Campbell."

"Do you mean our old friend, Billie?" asked Elinor.

"The same," said Nancy, in a low voice, for Billie Campbell was now approaching within hearing distance. "Her mother's dead and her father's brought her here to live with Miss Campbell while he builds a railroad in Russia, and she's going to High School and she's in our class and she's coming to and fro every day in her own motor car."

Nancy was speaking as rapidly as a talking machine going at full speed.

Billie, as her father had always called her, might have guessed that she was the subject of all this buzzing undertone of conversation among the school girls; but she was too well accus-

tomed to strange faces and new places to feel stiff and shy now at the looks of curiosity which were turned on her. On the contrary, the West Haven girls themselves felt a little ill at ease and countrified in the presence of this new sophomore, who, with her father, an engineer, had lived in many countries and seen a great deal of that mysterious outside world which sleepy, quiet West Haven had never troubled itself much about.

But Billie Campbell was not destined to renew her acquaintance just then with these childhood friends of hers. A slender, very pretty girl, beautifully dressed, hurried out of the school building and called:

“Oh, Miss Campbell, may I speak with you a moment?”

“We might have known it,” cried Nancy Brown savagely. “If Billie Campbell hadn’t owned a motor car, Belle Rogers would never have given herself the trouble even to speak to her.”

You perhaps know what a dangerous quality snobbishness is in a girl’s school. A very little of

it is like a drop of strong poison in a pail of water. It pollutes the whole pail. So it was at West Haven High School. Belle Rogers, the prettiest and richest girl in town, had picked out six more or less wealthy and intimate friends in the sophomore class and constituted herself leader of what they called "The Mystic Seven." These seven girls held themselves aloof from the poorer girls in the class and committed the unpardonable sin of snubbing every girl outside their charmed circle.

Very bitter were the feelings of the other ten sophomores against the "Mystic Seven," who refused to mingle in the sports of the class and kept themselves apart at recess, talking in low, mysterious voices and laughing behind their pocket handkerchiefs when the other girls strolled by.

"They always make me feel shabbier than I really am," Mary Price had once said.

And now the "Mystic Seven" had snatched up this nice, athletic-looking, new sophomore, whom many of them remembered as a bright, romping little girl years before.

“I suppose they’ll have to call themselves ‘The Mystic Eight’ now,” said one of the girls, a little bitterly.

“Can’t we ask her to join the ‘Blue Birds’?” put in Elinor Butler, who was eligible in point of wealth to enter the richer society, but had coldly declined the honor and had formed a society herself, called the “Blue Birds.”

“She couldn’t belong to both clubs,” said Nancy, “and you may be sure she has accepted the invitation of that little golden-haired, blue-eyed Belle Rogers, who put on an extra soft pedal even to call out her name.”

“Well, Billie Campbell will probably never have cause to know that Belle’s tongue is sharper than a serpent’s tooth, so what’s the odds,” observed Mary Price philosophically. “We got on perfectly well before she came and I suppose we can manage to support life pretty comfortably even if she is a member of the ‘Mystic Seven.’ ”

Her friends laughed, as they strolled by twos and threes into the broad, arched entrance leading into the corridor of the building. Mary Price often relieved their wounded feelings by

ending discussions concerning the "Mystic Seven" with a joke, although not one of them had been cut more deeply than she herself by the cruel speeches of Belle Rogers and her friends; for, since the death of Captain Price, Mary Price and her mother, as you will see later, had had a hard struggle to make both ends meet.

In the meantime, Belle Rogers was using all her arts on the unsuspecting Wilhelmina Campbell.

"We have never met," she was saying, "but I heard you were going to enter our class and I wanted to be the first to welcome you."

"Thank you," said Billie, who had a boyish, direct way of answering people.

"We wanted to know," went on Belle quickly, "if you wouldn't become a member of our society, the Mystic Seven. It is the most exclusive and nicest society in the school; the seven nicest girls in West Haven. We are all intimate friends, you know."

Billie gazed with admiration into Belle's lovely, childlike face. Her own hair was straight and secretly she had always admired curls. Belle's

pale golden hair curled about her low forehead in soft ringlets. Her great china-blue eyes looked appealingly into Billie's gray ones, and her rosy lips, which were much too thin when her face was in repose, parted with a winning smile. She was dressed in blue a little darker than her eyes and a small blue velvet toque was perched coquettishly on top of her curls.

"She looks like a picture pasted inside of an old trunk mamma used to have," said Billie to herself. "I could almost believe she was a bisque doll. I never saw anything like her."

"You will join us, won't you?" went on Belle wistfully.

"I'm afraid I should be one too many and make an unlucky number. Seven is supposed to be lucky, isn't it?"

"Oh, we're not superstitious," laughed Belle. "We can change the name to the 'Happy Eight,' or something of that sort. We are looking for nice girls, and as soon as I saw you I knew you would be the one for us. We want to enlarge the club."

"Dear me," said Billie thoughtfully, "in a class

of seventeen girls are only seven nice enough to be asked to join your club?"

"Oh, they are nice enough," replied Belle. "Elinor Butler is really quite nice, but they are not just our sort, don't you know, and mamma has always cautioned me to be very careful about my companions."

"Elinor Butler?" questioned Billie. "She is my old friend, and Nancy Brown and Mary Price? Aren't any of them members?"

Just then the gong for chapel boomed out in the September stillness and Belle could only shake her head for denial, as the two girls hurried into the building.

"I don't think I could ever get on with that blonde doll baby," thought Billie, as she followed Belle into the chapel for morning prayer, which always opened the day at West Haven High School.

At recess the new sophomore was quite overwhelmed by the attentions of the Mystic Seven. They showed her the building and the grounds, the class-locker rooms and the gymnasium, which interested her most of all. And in return she

showed them her motor car. But, somehow, she did not quite like these stylish and rather over-dressed young girls. Their conversation really bored her and she was disappointed.

It had been her own suggestion to go to West Haven High School when her father was summoned abroad to build a railroad.

"I think it's high time I met some nice outdoor girls, papa," she had said. "I am afraid of boarding school girls. They are so different from you."

Her father had laughed joyfully over this speech.

"I hope there's not much resemblance between me and a boarding school girl, my little Billie," he said, pinching her cheek.

And now the nice open-air girls whom she had recalled with pleasure after a summer spent in West Haven had not come near enough even to greet her and she had been obliged to pair off with seven fashion plates.

"It's perfectly maddening," she exclaimed to herself, giving the turf on the campus a savage little kick. "Nancy and Elinor actually avoid

meeting my eyes as if I were some one unfit to know. I wish I had consented to go to boarding school, after all, instead of coming to Cousin Helen. I don't want to belong to a silly society that does nothing but have afternoon teas. I want to play basket ball and go on long tramps with other girls and have picnics. I'm so disappointed, I could weep aloud."

This was the picture Billie had drawn in her mind of life at West Haven High School and here she was an outcast from all the good times and open air games of the class, simply because not one of her old friends would come near her. She long remembered that first day at school as the loneliest and most wretched of her whole life.

Then the last gong sounded and everybody went home except Billie, who had an appointment with Miss Gray, the principal. After the interview, in a rebellious and disconsolate humor, homesick for her father and disappointed with the whole world, she cranked up her red car and whirled away toward the open country.

As she sped along the road she passed the three friends of that summer of years ago, walk-

ing briskly away from town. They did not even look up as she whirled by and the lump in her throat grew so big that it resolved itself into a sob and two hot tears trickled down her cheeks.

“Perhaps they’re going over to the woods; just what I would have loved to have done,” wept the disappointed young girl, whose life had been a lonely one in spite of her father’s devotion and constant companionship.

She was still drying her eyes when she noticed some distance ahead a man leap into the road and wave his arms violently. Billie slowed down and came to a stop; for at the side of the road another very ill-looking man was lying prone on his back with closed eyes and slightly parted lips.

“What is it?” she asked. “Has your friend been hurt?”

“No, miss,” answered the man who had stopped her, “but he has walked fifteen miles today and I am afraid he’s about all in. I am trying to get him to his house, but I can’t carry him and he can’t take another step.”

“Where is his house?” asked Billie.

“Are you familiar with these parts, miss?”

"No," she answered.

"It's just up that lane about a mile. Only a matter of five minutes to you."

"Can you get him into the car?" asked Billie, noticing that this rather sinister looking stranger had only one arm; also that his right eye was out and there was a long scar across his upper lip.

"Easily," he replied, and without another word he expeditiously supported his friend to the motor car and lifted him into the back seat.

"Poor fellow," exclaimed Billie sympathetically. "It's well I happened along."

The sick man was indeed a wretched looking object, with a thin, lantern-jawed face, hollow feverish eyes and a sunken chest. Occasionally he coughed behind his hands apologetically.

"Down the lane, did you say?" she asked.

"Yes, miss, you can just see the house. It's the gray one up near the woods."

"I'll have him there in a few minutes," she answered, putting on all speed.

The little machine flew along the hard sandy road like a redbird on the wing. Billie occasion-

ally glanced over her shoulder at the sick man and each time her eyes met his, which seemed to burn like coals of fire. She had not liked the looks of the other man. His one remaining eye was much too close to his hooked nose; but the sick man appealed to her sympathies. Billie's nature was not a suspicious one. She had encountered many people in her life, and it is only people who have lived out of the world who are apt to suspect strangers.

As she drew up the car in front of what appeared to be a very old, long-deserted fisherman's house and turned to see her passengers alight, she found the one-eyed man bending over his companion.

"He's fainted, miss," he said. "If you'll go around back of the house to the old well and draw up a pail of cold water, I guess we can revive him. Just let down the pail by the wheel at the side—you'll see the handle,—and then get a glass or pitcher or something 'round there in the shed."

As the man was apparently very busy loosening the neck-band of his friend's shirt, there

seemed nothing else for Billie to do but to obey his directions. In fact, her sympathies were so deeply aroused that she was more than eager to help.

She dashed around the corner in an instant, rushed to the old well, and exerting her strength turned the handle of the rusty wheel around and around while the rattling chain lowered the moss-covered bucket deeper and deeper until it struck the water. Waiting only until the bucket was filled, she began to raise it as rapidly as she could, but her muscles were sorely tried by the stubbornness of the rusty wheel and the additional weight of the water.

The thought of the exhausted man spurred her on, however, and at length, flushed and perspiring, she succeeded in drawing the bucket to a little shelf where she left it while she searched for a receptacle in which to carry the water. She found no difficulty in pushing open a loosely-hung door at the end of the shed, and, after groping around a moment or two in the semi-darkness, she discovered a battered tin pail. Hasten-

ing back with it, she rinsed and filled it, and hurried around to the front of the house.

As she turned the corner, she stopped short! Where were the two men? Where was her machine? *Where—was—her—machine?*

Too dazed to move, Billie stood rooted to the spot while the water trickled out of a hole in the pail and made a little pool at her feet.

Suddenly she gasped, "They must be around the other corner. They *must* be!"

But they were not!—and then Billie noticed the tracks in the crushed grass that told the tale. The motor car had been turned and driven away up the lane!

Billie sank down on the step in front of the old house almost too spent with her exertions and her shock to think.

Then she flung down the pail and rushed up the lane as though she would try to catch the vanished car,—but she stopped as abruptly with a half laugh.

"They may be miles and miles away by this time,—they had time enough while I was fussing over that old well. And the chain made

such a noise and the wheel creaked so, I never heard another sound!"

Billie's eyes filled with indignant tears as she began slowly to saunter back to the old house. She felt somehow impelled to return to the scene of her loss, perhaps to persuade herself that it was really so.

As she neared the spot where she had last seen her red car, she noticed a slip of paper blowing lightly about. Idly she picked it up and glanced over the words written upon it. Then she stood still and caught her breath as she realized what they meant.

"Stay here. Tell no one. Back soon."

That was the message that Billie read, and she did not doubt for a moment that it was intended for her.

"Yes, perhaps you will come back, and perhaps you won't," she said half aloud. "Maybe you think that I think that you have gone for a doctor. But I don't. You are two mean, wicked men to outwit a girl like that. I'll never see my car again!"

Just as Billie uttered this despairing cry, she heard a distant hail, and then another.

“Who is coming now?” she thought. “It’s too soon to expect my sick (?) passenger and his one-eyed friend, and anyway I hear no car,—nor anything else, now,” she added. “Maybe I imagined it. Oh, I’d like to be a man for about five minutes! Then they wouldn’t *dare*!”

CHAPTER II.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

“There she goes,” Nancy Brown had exclaimed as “The Comet,” Billie’s motor, whirled by; “too proud even to ask her old friends to take a spin.”

“Now, Nancy,” protested Elinor, “don’t be too hard on her. Remember, she has not seen any of us since we were children. Perhaps she’s forgotten all about us. Besides, I’ve been thinking that we ought to have done the first speaking. She was starting right for us when Belle Rogers stopped her.”

“Well, I tried twice to speak to her,” said Nancy, “and she wouldn’t look at me. I am afraid we shall never get a ride in that pretty motor car, and the only one I was ever in was the stationary automobile at the tintype place at the County Fair.”

The girls walked on silently for a few moments. The red motor car had turned a curve

in the road and was out of sight and the place seemed very lonely and still. The afternoon shadows were beginning to lengthen as the sun moved slowly behind the pine woods, which formed a dark background against the flat, green meadows about West Haven.

"I can't imagine why we should be wasting time about a friend who has forgotten us," exclaimed Mary Price, "when Elinor has brought us out here to tell us some mysterious secret. Don't you think it's about time to begin, Elinor? It's getting late and we've still a good ways to go."

"I was just going to," answered her friend, "but suppose we take the short cut across the fields, and I'll tell you on the way. Two other people are in the secret, Charlie Clay and Ben Austen. They have promised to meet us at the old house. Of course, the whole thing may be of no importance."

"But what is it?" interrupted Nancy. "You keep dodging around the bush."

"Now, Nancy," answered Elinor, who had a calm, placid disposition and never hurried about

anything, "don't put your most peculiar characteristic off on me. You know very well that you are the one who loves to keep a mystery until we are all of us nearly bursting with curiosity."

"Don't quarrel, children," interrupted Mary. "Remember that members of the Blue Bird Society are bound over not to quarrel."

"We aren't quarreling; we're just discussing. But do go on, Elinor. I can't stand the suspense much longer."

"What I am going to tell you," said Elinor, "may be of the vastest importance or it may be just nothing whatever. At any rate, I didn't want to take any chances and it was simple enough for us to meet the boys out here and see for ourselves."

"See what, Elinor Butler?" ejaculated Nancy impatiently. "You always begin at the last of a story and tell backwards."

Elinor smiled provokingly.

"That's to see how much curiosity you can accumulate without exploding, Nancy, dear."

Nancy shut her lips tightly. She was determined now, at any cost, not to speak again until

Elinor had really started on the story, but how irritating Elinor could be at times!

Mary was never disturbed over these little tiffs of the two friends which were merely the ups and downs of the endless conversation that flowed between them.

“This is what happened then, Nancy darling,” continued Elinor, slipping an arm around her friend’s waist, while she locked her other arm through Mary’s. And the three girls hurried on, too absorbed in their intimate talk to notice the flash of a scarlet motor car through the high bushes, which bordered both sides of Boulder Lane, the name of the road which intercepted the two meadows.

“I was coming across Court House Square late yesterday afternoon after my music lesson. You know I have begun to study with the new teacher, Mme. Alta. Just as I came to the statue of Thomas Jefferson, I heard some one call very softly, or rather it was more like a hiss than a call. I suppose I should have rushed off frightened, but I am never afraid of people. It’s only spiders and snakes and bulls that make me shiver.

So, I didn't run away, but waited, and I discovered that the hiss came from around the other side of the statue and was not meant for me at all. Even then I should have gone on if I hadn't heard some one cry out. I couldn't understand the language, but another voice said in English: 'There are only two boxes left. Take them to the old house in Boulder Lane to-night and never keep me waiting this long again.' Then the other man said something and the English voice said: 'You can haul them to-morrow morning. It'll be time enough when I get the signal to do the rest.' I couldn't understand what the man answered, but the English voice said: 'I'll kill the whole crew of Butlers and anybody else who interferes with me. I'm in a desperate humor and I won't be bothered.' Fortunately they took the walk that goes to the docks, because they would certainly have seen me if they had come around on the other side. But I saw them plainly when they passed under the electric light. They looked like seamen."

" 'Kill the whole crew of Butlers,'" repeated Mary Price. "Does he mean that he is going to

wipe your family off the face of the earth? And for what?"

"That is what I want to find out. It wouldn't do any special harm to take a late afternoon stroll in this direction, if the boys are with us. I didn't want to say anything to father about it. He is so busy, and you know how excitable he is. William is exactly like father. Edward and mother and I are the only calm, peaceful members of the family, and mother's sick and Edward is at college. Besides, you know, the man may not have meant us. The county is full of Butlers, dozens of them. Some of them claim kin and some do not. They are the most quarrelsome, high-tempered people in existence—that is, all except Edward and me."

The other girls laughed.

"Not high-tempered, Elinor," said Nancy, "but you have a sort of royal manner when you are displeased that I imagine a queen might have when one of her subjects is disobedient."

"What's that?" interrupted Mary. "I thought I heard some one call."

The girls paused and listened. They were

standing in a broad, flat meadow which seemed to stretch out indefinitely in one direction like an enormous pale-green billiard table; but in the other direction, bordered by alder bushes, lay Boulder Lane; so called because of an immense gray boulder, which in some prehistoric upheaval had been tossed here, and which resembled now an old gray sentinel standing on perpetual guard.

"Why, there's the automobile," exclaimed Nancy, after some minutes, following an occasional flash of red through the bushes, as the flying motor car sped on up the lane.

"I wonder what she is doing up Boulder Lane? Exploring by herself, I suppose. It must be lonely," observed Mary.

A fresh salt breeze had sprung up from the ocean, bringing with it the chill of the oncoming night. The three girls hastened their footsteps. If they were late, the boys might not wait for them.

"Boys are so unreliable," Mary had remarked.

"Not Ben Austen," said Elinor. "Father says he is as trustworthy as the Bank of England. But he's slow. He never likes to stop one thing

until he finishes it, no matter what's waiting. He and Charlie are building a boat somewhere down the beach and they spend all their afternoons at it, but they are sure to be there if they promised."

By this time the girls had reached the hedge. It was certainly a lonesome place. The old house which had been unoccupied for many years because its last occupant had committed suicide by hanging himself from a beam, appeared in the gathering dusk like a solitary gray ghost; the front windows resembled two large sad eyes gazing into space and the walls, streaked with the tempests of many seasons, had the appearance of a worn, tear-stained face.

"Dear me," whispered Nancy, "I had forgotten what a weird old place this was. It might be the entrance to a tomb."

"Halo-o-o!" called a boyish voice, and a tall, overgrown lad appeared coming up the lane from the direction of the beach, followed by a much smaller youth, who was so absorbed with whittling a little boat that he did not even look up when the girls answered the call.

"Don't make so much noise, Ben," said Elinor, when they had climbed through the hedge and congregated together in the lane. "This is just an investigating party. We are not to take any risks."

"There seems to be nobody around," replied Ben. "We saw an automobile go past a little while ago with two men in it and some big boxes in the back. It was almost stuck in the sand. I wonder it could get along at all. It looked like a big, red lobster."

"Red?" cried the girls in one voice.

"I never saw anything redder in my life," put in Charlie.

"You must be mistaken about the men, then," said Elinor decisively. "Because Billie Campbell owns it and was running it herself a little while ago."

"Well, we were not close enough to get a good look, but Billie Campbell appeared to be two men at that distance. But come along, girls. It is getting late and we had better not lose any more time. Now, what is it we are looking for? Butler bundles and boxes?"

“I don’t think they can be called Butler bundles,” replied Elinor, “since my family is to be wiped out of existence if it interferes with the bundles, whatever they are.”

The boys and girls who were thoroughly enjoying the fun and mystery of the expedition now advanced on tiptoe to the ghostly looking house, like a party of conspirators in a play.

“I feel like a pirate,” whispered Nancy, giggling.

Suddenly Ben, who was ahead of the others, stopped and put his fingers to his lips. He beckoned to them to follow him around to the side of the house.

“I heard something inside the house,” he said, in a low voice. “Wait here, girls, with Charlie while I take a look.”

He crept cautiously around to the front and presently they heard him open the door and walk boldly in.

“I’m going, too,” said Charlie, unable to contain his curiosity any longer, and the girls followed him single-file into a low-studded, dusty room, unfurnished except for one rickety chair,

but behind that stood—Billie Campbell! And facing Billie in the dim light just inside the door stood Ben, surprise written as plainly upon his face as bravery, defiance, and apprehension were mingled upon hers.

The girls were too amazed to speak at first.

“Billie Campbell!” cried Nancy, at last. “Did two men frighten you and run away with your automobile?”

Billie nodded. Somehow it was very difficult to keep back her tears now that help had come; but she never had been a cry-baby even as a child and now she choked down her sobs with all her strength, for in the gathering dusk she had recognized the faces of her three childhood friends who had refused to remember her that day at school.

“Oh, but I’m glad to see you!” she exclaimed. “After the men went off I noticed that the front door was open and I came in a minute to see if it really looked as though it were lived in now-a-days as the man said. But it just looks deserted, and it’s dreadfully dusty except here in the cor-

ner and from here to the door,—just as though something had been dragged across the floor."

The young girl had been talking excitedly, but now she stopped abruptly and with a friendly look and a gesture of intense relief she stretched her arms over her head, as though with the relaxation of her muscles she could also free herself from the sudden shock and dread that had bound her.

She was tall for her age, fifteen, with a frank, almost boyish face, fine gray eyes, and a rather large mouth which curled up at the corners when she smiled and showed two graduated rows of strong white teeth. Her light brown hair was parted in the middle and rolled on each side into a thick, knobby plait in the back.

"She's not very strong on looks," thought Nancy, who set great store on beauty herself, "but she's got the nicest face I ever saw."

"How did it happen?" asked Ben.

Then Billie told how the two men had duped her and left her behind the deserted house, and how she had found the message on the slip of paper.

"Then the men are coming back?" cried Eli-nor.

"Perhaps," replied Billie, "and we'd better hurry away from here as fast as we can in case they come. They may not intend to do me any harm, but they are a very determined-looking pair of characters, as papa says, and one of them has a long pistol and a knife in his belt, for I saw them."

"But what about the red motor?" demanded Nancy, whose yearning to ride in the car had somewhat biased her good judgment.

"I'll just have to lose it, I suppose," answered Billie.

"I have a scheme," put in Charlie, who rarely spoke without due deliberation. "Miss Campbell is just about as tall as I am—she may be a little shorter," he added, stretching himself to his full height.

The others smiled secretly at this, for Billie was at least an inch taller than Charlie, but they knew that the most sensitive spot in his nature was his height, since he was the oldest member of the party and Ben overtopped him by nearly three

inches. And Charlie had a sneaking suspicion that he never would be tall enough. His bones were small and his frame as slender and delicate as a girl's.

“Suppose I put on your hat and veil and your long coat,” he continued, “and sit here on the step waiting. It’s getting darker all the time, and so if the men come back they’ll think it is you; but if they thought somebody was onto them, they would probably break their word and chase off with the motor.”

“I don’t think that would be quite fair,” said Billie. “Suppose they found out you were a boy. They might shoot you or something.”

“But they won’t find it out,” answered Charlie. “Hurry up. We have no time to lose.”

“Yes, do,” urged Ben. “It’s much the best way. We couldn’t leave you for the thieves and it’s a pity to lose the car. Besides, the rest of us will hide in the house and if anything happens, we’ll come to the rescue.”

Billie removed her ulster without another word.

"She's a dandy, sensible girl," thought Ben to himself.

"You'd better take the skirt, too. If they saw your trouser legs, it would be all off," said Billie, as she unbuckled her belt and removed her gray walking skirt, standing before them without any embarrassment in a short, red silk petticoat.

"What about shoes?" observed Mary Price. "Those Charlie is wearing are not much like a girl's shoes."

"How about these pumps? I wear No. fives," said Billie, calmly kicking off her slippers.

Charlie, good naturedly, unlaced his stout boy's boots.

"I might be able to get my big toe into them," he said. "Like Cinderella's step-sisters and the little glass slipper."

"These aren't any Cinderella's," laughed Billie.

How nice these boys and girls did seem to her and how fine it was to be with them, even in this strange and dangerous situation!

Charlie could wear the slippers, however, although they were somewhat narrow in the toe, and presently he was fully dressed in a girl's

suit, with his face almost concealed by a long gray chiffon veil, twisted around Billie's gray felt hat, trimmed with one red wing.

"Hurry, they're really coming," called Billie, catching the familiar sound of a motor engine in the distance.

"All right," said Ben, who had been hovering around Charlie in pretended admiration of his changed appearance. "Good luck, old boy!" he added as he hastened after the girls up the narrow flight of stairs into the attic, which was perfectly dark and seemed a better place for hiding than outside, where enough twilight still lingered to make objects plainly visible.

"We are a good deal like 'The Musicians of Bremen,'" observed Mary, in a low voice, as they lay stretched face downward on the attic floor. "Don't you remember that old fairy tale of Grimm's; when the robber came back to the house in the wood he was bitten and kicked and scratched and pecked by the dog and the donkey and the cat and the rooster, and then they set up such a braying and barking and crowing and meowing that he ran away scared to death?"

"If anything did happen, we might try the howling part," said Billie. "I should think a piercing shriek from a place like this would scare a brave man——"

"Sh-h, they're almost here," cautioned Ben. "Don't move, any one. The floor will creak."

"I'm going to sneeze," hissed Nancy, in the dark.

"Press your upper lip and don't dare do it," whispered Elinor.

"Shut up, all of you," said Ben, as the motor car drew up beside the hedge at one side of the house.

"If there is any shrieking to be done," added Mary, "I'll do it. I'm the best shrieker in the sophomore class. I know how to do it in the top of my head——"

"Sh-h-h!"

CHAPTER III.

THE MUSICIANS OF BREMEN.

Nancy could not keep from trembling slightly as she heard the car panting at a little distance and realized that perhaps a moment of real danger was near, in spite of their joking. Elinor, too, felt very much like giving away to a few tremors, but she reproached herself for such weak behavior and held her body as rigid as a stone image while she said sternly in her mind:

“My knees are not at all weak. It’s only the position I am lying in that makes them feel queer.”

A sound as though a heavy foot had been placed on the step outside was heard and then a voice which Billie recognized as that of the one-eyed man said:

“Well, young lady, I suppose you have had about enough of this? We have kept our word,

you see, which I judge you found on the paper, as you are still here."

There was a short silence. Evidently Charlie nodded assent to the supposition and the motion gave full satisfaction, for the voice went on, "Has any one been around, miss? You didn't hear the sound of any voices, did you, while we were gone? We saw some people in the field as we left. Did they come this way? Speak up, miss."

Not a heart on the attic floor but thumped as the one-eyed man asked these questions. They had never thought of Charlie's voice, which was about as deep as a full grown man's!

A perfectly death-like stillness reigned for a moment. It was plain that Charlie was not going to trust his voice.

"Do not be frightened, Señorita," put in the thin man. "You may speak without fear. Do not weep. Perhaps she did see something. It was not the ghost of the dead man who hanged himself in here, was it?" he added in a low voice.

"Hold your tongue," said the other man.

"Speak up, young woman. Have you no voice left? You'll not have strength enough to run the car if you go on like this."

A deep sob reached the ears of the listeners overhead.

Then the alarming thought came to Ben: How was Charlie to run the motor car in case the men insisted on his leaving first? Plainly, it was necessary to get rid of these men somehow. Then they would all make a dash, and he would crank up while Billie jumped in and started the car.

"I'll have to hear the sound of your voice before I go," insisted the one-eyed man. "I want to hear you give me your sacred word of honor to keep this little loan of your car a secret. If we find that you have told, and we'll know it if you have, you and your family will regret it, that's all. We know how to take our revenge, don't we, Pedro? So speak up, young woman, and say the words. I promise——"

Another deep sob.

"Come, come. Hold up your head and let me see your face. Say, Pedro, look here; it doesn't

seem quite the same as it did half an hour ago, somehow. Strike a light!"

There was great but noiseless commotion in the attic! What if the men should lift Charlie's veil!

Since Mary had mentioned "The Musicians of Bremen" an idea had been forming in Ben's mind and he now hastily communicated it in a low whisper to his neighbor who passed it quickly down the line.

Just as the thin man outside exclaimed in a high sharp tone, "Why, it's a boy!" Ben whispered, "Ready!"

Immediately the attic was filled with a pandemonium of noise,—the barking of a dog, cries, and screams! It was a truly terrifying combination, Mary's shrill shriek rising weirdly above the other sounds as though from one in mortal agony.

The two men outside were startled in spite of themselves and dashed away on an uncontrollable impulse, the thin man shouting, "The ghost of the dead man! His evil spirit haunts us!"

"Good work, Ben," called Charlie softly, after

a moment. "Come out, quick! They've gone around back of the house. You can come this way, but hurry!"

The adventure had been so exciting and was so quickly over that the girls hardly realized where they were when they found themselves in front of the house, standing in a half-be-wildered group in the deepening twilight.

"Nobody shall take any more chances for my motor car," whispered Billie. "You have all risked your lives enough as it is, and I'm deeply grateful. The men may be around there by the machine, so let's make a break for the fields and go straight home."

"No," replied Ben stoutly; "it would be best for you girls to get away, but Charlie and I will finish the job. Those fellows are cowards, any way, and——"

"But you can't run the car," said Billie, rapidly putting on her things, which Charlie had discarded with a sigh of relief. "I'll have to stay. The other girls must go, though."

The discussion, however, was ended by Charlie, who had skipped off to reconnoiter and

now appeared running at full speed around the side of the house.

"Come on, let's all go," he said. "They've gone, but they might come back."

Without a word, the others followed him and jumped into the car, while Ben, who knew a little about motors, began to crank up the machine. Suddenly a voice spoke out of the darkness:

"This looks like a nice little party. Get out of that car, every one of you, or I'll shoot," and the sinister looking one-armed man, who appeared to have sprung up from the earth, stood at the side of the automobile with his pistol pointed straight at Billie. "Did you imagine," he continued, "that a parcel of children could fool a man like me?"

There was no reply to the question. Mary and Nancy were so limp with fear they could not have lifted a little finger if there had been a dozen pistols pointing at them. Elinor might have slipped a ramrod down her back, so stiffly and proudly did she hold herself in that fearful moment. Billie had turned white as a sheet, but she still had strength enough left to make a move to

get out when Ben, whose stubborn nature would not even now give up the fight, raised his overgrown, boyish figure from the ground where he had been kneeling, and with a quick motion pressed a piece of glittering steel to the man's forehead.

"Drop that pistol, or you're a dead man," he said in the deepest chest tones he could produce. His voice was still in the tenor stage.

Not even a gentleman of fortune who had lost an eye and an arm in past dangerous adventures could quite keep from shrinking at this extremely unpleasant sensation produced by cold steel against his face, and without a word of protest he dropped the pistol in the road.

"Now, back off," said Ben, "and don't stop until you get as far as that tree over there."

The man retreated, cursing under his breath, and in another instant they were off in the dark.

"We forgot to pick up his pistol," exclaimed Charlie, as three shots rang out in quick succession.

"But Ben has one," said Billie, feeling some-

how that she had known these nice brave boys for a long time, instead of three-quarters of an hour.

"That was only a monkey wrench," answered Charlie, laughing.

And Billie was moved with admiration and respect for the slow-speaking, quiet boy, who had twice in so short a time outwitted two very dangerous and experienced adventurers.

It was a splendid ride in the darkness. The fresh salt air swept their faces and set their blood to tingling with a new enjoyment. They had just been through a most dangerous and exciting experience, these young people, and Nancy and Mary were not ashamed to admit that they at least had been very much frightened. But people who have lived always by the sea are used to looking danger calmly in the face.

Half a mile beyond the quiet little harbor of West Haven a lighthouse stood on a small, rocky promontory, and from the shore on a calm day could be seen rows of sharp-pointed rocks thrust out of the water like great black teeth waiting to devour any chance ship which might be blown against them. In bad weather the water about

the Black Reefs, as they were called, was lashed and churned into fury and sometimes after a great storm groups of people might be seen hurrying up the cliff path to the life-saving station, while out in the ocean, stuck fast to the teeth of the Black Reefs was a pretty three-masted schooner, perhaps, or a stained and scarred old freight ship, looking very small and helpless in its terrible plight.

Billie, herself, was the only person in the motor car who had not seen a shipwreck on the Black Reefs. She had never even seen one of the September storms when the sea rolled itself into mountainous waves and dashed against the cliffs of West Haven.

As they neared the town, Billie slowed down the motor and turned to speak to her new friends.

“I can’t even try to thank all of you for what you have done for me, but I want to tell you that I think you are the bravest, nicest boys and girls in the whole world, and it was just to be with you that I came back to West Haven to go to school. I was very unhappy to-day because I was afraid that Nancy and Mary and Elinor had forgotten

me and the splendid times we had together one summer when I was a little girl——”

“Oh, Billie, we hadn’t forgotten you,” broke in Nancy. “We thought when you joined Belle Rogers’ crowd that you——”

“But I didn’t join them,” Billie interrupted, laughing. “They kidnapped me and never let me out of their sight the whole time. I had almost made up my mind to write to papa to let me go to boarding school, after all. I wanted to know some real girls. I have never had a chance before, you know, and when I talked it over with papa, we decided that all of you were the nicest real girls we had ever known, and I just thought I would spend the winter with Cousin Helen and meet you again, while papa was in Russia.”

The three girls blushed with pleasure at this gratifying compliment.

“We were just as glad to see you, too, Billie,” said Elinor. “It was all a foolish mistake. But we shall be friends now, and you must join the Blue Birds. It’s the Sophomore Club, and we have lots of fun.”

“Thank you, I’d love to,” answered Billie, as

gratefully and modestly as if she had been paid the highest honor in the land. "I've been thinking," she added, "that we'd better keep all this business about these men secret. You know Cousin Helen; if she hears about it, we'll probably have to store the motor car. She'll never let me out of her sight again."

"We'll keep it secret," cried the others in a chorus.

So this very sensational adventure, which would certainly have spread like wildfire through the town of West Haven once it got out, remained a profound secret.

Some good came of it, however, since it served to unite four old friends. But we have not seen the last of the mysterious individuals who borrowed Billie's motor car.

CHAPTER IV.

PLOTS AND PLANS.

Belle Rogers was not always the bewitchingly pretty, dimpling, smiling young girl who had endeavored to annex Billie.

And when she was not pretty, Belle's friends liked to keep well out of her vicinity. At such times two little white dents appeared on each side of her nose. Her large, china blue eyes were transformed into wells of steely gray and the smiling, baby mouth became two narrow white lips. All the color left her cheeks, and people who did not know her would exclaim:

“How faded and ill she looks!”

When Belle looked like this she was unusually quiet at first, but it was the quiet which comes before a tornado, and it was only when the storm burst that those unfamiliar with her ways realized that Belle had been very, very angry.

This is what happened on the day after the ex-

citing experience in Boulder Lane, and all because Wilhelmina Campbell, true to her old friends, the "Blue Birds," after being formally invited, had positively declined to join the "Mystic Seven."

"I am sorry," she said, trying her best to be cordial, "but, you see, the others had first claim on me because I have known them a long time and I have already promised to become a Blue Bird."

"We asked you first," exclaimed Belle, in a preternaturally quiet tone of voice.

"I don't see why that should make any difference," answered Billie, feeling very uncomfortable.

"It makes a great deal of difference," answered Belle, who was always gifted with a flow of words in the moments of her greatest anger. "You are probably not familiar with the ways of schools and school societies. I understand you have never been to school before."

"Oh, yes, I have. I went to school in Paris for three months and to another in Dresden for a whole winter."

"This is America," went on Belle, in a slow,

even tone, taking no other notice of the interruption, "and if you decline the honor we have paid you in the sophomore year, you will not only be blackballed in our societies the other two years, but you will not receive any invitations from me and my friends to our parties now or ever, and you will be obliged to associate with the commonest and most ordinary girls in West Haven. 'The children of cooks——'"

"Mary Price," thought Billie. Mrs. Price had a tea room.

"The daughters of seamen——"

"Nancy!" said Billie out loud. Nancy's father was a sea captain.

"Yes, Nancy Brown," continued Belle, growing angrier every moment. "You will simply be an outcast in West Haven, and I advise you to think the matter over well before you decide to join that low, common crowd, for I assure you it will be the last of you with us——"

Billie was so aghast at the insolence of the spoiled girl that she did not attempt to interrupt the rush of words which seemed to flow from her lips without any effort whatever. She was very

angry herself, as a matter of fact, but with the self-control she had learned from her father, she determined to hold her peace until Belle had run down, as she expressed it later to the other girls.

At last there came a pause, and Billie, who had been sitting on the window ledge in the gymnasium swinging her feet and thinking of what she was going to say when she was entirely prepared to speak, slipped down to the floor and stood before the enraged girl like a brave soldier in the face of battle.

But this was all she said, for Billie was really very much like a boy.

“I don’t think it is any honor to join your club, or go with you and your friends. I wouldn’t give up Mary and Nancy and Elinor for twenty Mystic Sevens. I’d rather go to boarding school any day, and that’s about the worst fate that could happen to me.”

Then she turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Belle in the grip of a tempest of sobs and tears. Such rages are quite like the West Indian storms which sweep up the coast with a great

blowing of wind and then, after a tremendous roar of thunder, the downpour follows.

That night in her pretty chintz-hung bedroom in the beautiful Rogers house, which was one of the show places of West Haven, Belle Rogers planned her revenge. Her temples were throbbing and her whole body ached with exhaustion. Tempers are really quite as devastating to the system as the West Indian tornadoes are to the country over which they sweep.

"I'll get even with that rough tom-boy," she said out loud. "I'll pay her back if it takes all winter to do it. I'll make her sorry she ever came to West Haven, and I'll make the others pay, too. They'll see what it means to interfere with me and my plans. Perhaps papa will give me a motor car, only I'm afraid of the things, and I never could run one. My hands are much too small and delicate to handle machinery."

"Belle, darling, do you feel any better?" asked Mrs. Rogers, anxiously, outside the door.

Belle made no reply. It was her custom to pretend to be asleep when she wished to be alone, and she wished now to spend a long uninterrupted

evening to herself, for her thoughts were very busy. A plan had come into her head. It had sprung up suddenly, full-grown, as if it had been secretly hatching in the bottom of her mind for a long time and now appeared a matured scheme.

Her blood tingled at the notion. It was such an audacious, daring thing that the very thought made her dizzy.

"I'll do it," she said at last, her mind made up. "I'll do it, and I'll get only one person to help me, because it will take two to work it. Now, who shall that person be? It would be best to ask a Blue Bird, but which one?"

Her thoughts ran over the girls in the despised society, but there was only one of the ten whom she would quite dare to approach. The others were fiercely loyal to each other.

This possible traitor was a new girl in West Haven. Her name was Francesca Alta, but her friends called her Fannie. She was the daughter of Mme. Alta, a music teacher lately established in the town. Many of the girls were taking music lessons of Mme. Alta, and Belle, who was one of her pupils, often had opportunities

of speaking to the little dark-haired daughter, although she had only nodded to her coldly so far.

"I will speak to her to-morrow," she exclaimed, as she swallowed the sleeping powder her indulgent mother always gave her after one of these violent headaches.

In the morning Belle had regained her baby smile. The red had left her nose and was now in its proper spots on her round, plump cheeks. Once more her large blue eyes looked appealingly into the eyes of those she honored with her glances. Belle never saw what she preferred to ignore, and one of the most delightful sights of that bright September morning was a red motor car filled with pretty young girls, which whirled into the High School grounds, making a bright splash of scarlet against the old gray walls of the building.

Belle did not see the "Comet" and its load, or would not see it; but later, Billie, who never bore malice, bowed a cheerful good morning to her enemy, and, to the surprise of the others, received a cordial bow in return.

"I am sorry I was cross to you yesterday, Miss

Campbell. Will you forgive me?" Belle asked her.

"Yes, indeed," answered the warm-hearted young girl. "It's awfully nice of you to admit it," and she secretly decided that the others were rather hard on Belle Rogers, after all.

However, when the girls heard of the apology, they were skeptical.

"It's the 'Comet' that won her over," observed Nancy.

"I don't believe it," answered their new, inseparable friend, who after two days' association was as intimate with the three girls as if she had known them always, so rapidly do young girl intimacies grow.

"Something does seem to have happened to her," said Mary Price. "Perhaps you gave her such a dressing-down, Billie, that she's turned over a new leaf. She would never have stooped to talk to Fannie Alta before, but she is doing it now, and look—wonders never cease?"

The two girls were indeed in intimate conversation. They were walking arm in arm up and down the campus, nibbling sandwiches. At

West Haven High School the girls either brought their luncheons with them to eat at recess or bought sandwiches of that plucky, hard-working little woman, Mrs. Price, Mary's mother, who made the sandwiches and brought them to the school herself in a big basket.

That is why Mary Price had exclaimed, "Will wonders never cease?" She had recognized the package of sandwiches in oil paper, which Belle Rogers must have bought from her mother, and which she was now sharing with dark, shabby little Fannie Alta.

"She used to say she would rather starve than eat one of mother's lettuce sandwiches," Mary exclaimed, "but she appears even to have come to that."

"If this is one of your mother's own, it's very delicious," exclaimed Billie, gallantly turning the conversation into other channels. After all, it was just as well not to form the habit of discussing Belle too much. Her father had never approved of criticising people.

"It doesn't lead to anything but bilious headaches," he used to say. "Sick, bilious headaches

and a very yellow complexion. Critical people always look like that, Billie, my girl."

Billie's complexion was clear and healthy. She had never had a bilious headache in her life. But, then, she was not given to picking flaws in other people's characters.

However, the novelty of the richest and proudest girl in West Haven making friends with a poor music teacher's daughter was soon to be eclipsed by a much more sensational and mysterious incident.

That afternoon, after school, when the four friends assembled in the carriage shed for their usual spin home in Billie's motor car, they found a note stuck conspicuously between the cushion and the back of the seat. It was addressed in a large angular hand to "Miss Wilhelmina Campbell and her friends, both boys and girls, especially Miss Butler," and inside it read:

"Keep quiet about Boulder Lane. You are watched and if you let a word slip out, the punishment will come quickly."

"How ridiculous," exclaimed Billie angrily, when she had shown the note to the others. "I

have a great mind to write papa all about it, only it would worry him to death. It is only cowards who write anonymous letters, anyhow."

But she did not write to her father, and the other girls, too, were silent on the matter.

They wondered many times who had put the note on the seat. Strangers were not unusual in West Haven, where sailors and seamen often came ashore, but the Girls' High School was at the other end of town and visitors ashore seldom strayed so far away from the shops and the little theatre.

"I'd like to know what their grudge is against the Butler family," Elinor had demanded, but no one could answer the question, and she was still determined not to disturb her highly excitable father.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST MOTOR PICNIC.

One Saturday morning early in September Miss Helen Campbell gave a breakfast party to her four favorite Blue Birds. It was to be the beginning of an eventful day for the young girls, three of whom were to take their first long motor trip, and, furthermore, the motor party was to end with a visit to Shell Island, where this excited and happy company of young people were to spend the night, motoring back to West Haven next day.

Miss Campbell herself was excited.

“It’s a novelty for me, my dears,” she exclaimed, beaming on her guests from behind the silver urn at the head of the breakfast table. “I’m a very dull, lonesome old woman, and having this nice child here with me is going to wake me into life again. I shall never be able to give you up, Wilhelmina. You had better write your

father that you have been adopted by a very obstinate old party, who believes that possession is nine points of the law.'

"I'm quite willing to be possessed, Cousin Helen," answered Billie. "If I could only see papa sometimes, I think I could say that I never was so gloriously happy in all my life."

Miss Campbell smiled with pleasure and the girls thought they had never seen her look more beautiful. Her white hair glistened like a bank of snow in the sunshine and her soft eyes were as blue as patches of West Haven Bay on a clear, still morning in summer.

There were times when the lonely spinster looked faded and worn, and at such times she used to shut herself up in her big gray stone house on Cliff Street and refuse to see even her most intimate friends.

"It's just one of my lonesome moods," she used to say, "and I would not for worlds inflict myself on innocent people when one is on me."

But Miss Campbell had not had a single attack of loneliness since Billie had come to live with her. The vigorous, active young girl had awak-

ened the entire household which had run on its steady even course for so many years, and now the place hardly recognized itself, filled with the happy voices and gay laughter of Billie and her friends.

It was an unusual sight for the big mahogany table in the dining room to be loaded with the best cut glass and silver and adorned with delicate lace doilies, which had belonged to Miss Campbell's grandmother. These thing had been laid away for many years. In the centre of the table was a crystal vase filled with forget-me-nots.

"They are the only flowers I could think of which were the color of your blue birds," Miss Campbell had explained. "Besides, they are my favorite color. You know, I always wear blue when I don't wear gray. Sometimes I wear black——"

"Black, Cousin Helen?" repeated Billie. "I didn't know you ever wore anything so mournful."

"You shall never see me in it, child, if I can

help it. But I have a black dress, only one, and I do wear it at times in my bedroom."

Some thirty years before Miss Campbell, then a young and beautiful girl, had come to West Haven to live with her grandfather and there she had lived ever since, except for an occasional trip abroad. It was supposed that she had suffered a great sorrow at some time in her life, but the real story had never been known. Captain Campbell, her grandfather, had been a jovial, pleasure loving old man, fond of company and entertaining. He liked to have his beautiful granddaughter stand at his side and receive his guests in a brocaded ball gown, with the famous Campbell diamonds blazing in her hair and the diamond and sapphire necklace around her throat.

But after General Campbell's death there were no more balls and dinners in the big, old house. The long parlors were seldom opened except to be cleaned and aired, and Miss Campbell, now a somewhat shrivelled pink and white little lady of fifty-five, interested herself only in the charities of West Haven.

"Yes, my dear children, this household and its

mistress have got into such a lethargy that it is time they were waked up. We have been sunk in so deep a rut, my old servants and I, that it might have closed over our heads and the world gone on just the same."

"Lots of poor families would have gone begging at Christmas, then, Miss Campbell," put in Elinor.

"And what would all those poor old seamen have done?" went on Nancy.

"And the Blue Birds," added Mary Price. "We should have had to use a corner of the gymnasium at school for our most secret society meetings."

Miss Campbell paid the rent of the Blue Bird club rooms.

"And, pray, what should I have done?" finished Billie. "I should have been knocking around still with papa, trying to get on with the queer people who live in hotels, and never have had nice girls to go with or a delightful home to stay in."

Miss Campbell blushed with pleasure.

"I have a great many surprises up my sleeve for my little Motor Maids. I shall only tell you

one, though. What would you say to a Blue Bird "Thanksgiving ball?"

"Oh, oh, oh! How splendid!" cried the young girls.

"Honk, honk!" went the motor horn at the front entrance, which was a signal for breakfast to come to an end and the party to be off.

A hamper of luncheon had been strapped behind the car with the suit cases. Miss Campbell sat between Elinor and Mary in the back, while Nancy took the seat now understood to be hers always, beside her friend Billie, in front. The four Campbell servants, who had grown old in their mistress's service, stood in a row on the gravel walk to witness the strange sight of their beloved "Miss Helen" sailing away in a red infernal machine, her blue automobile veil streaming out behind like a piece of flying cloud.

"Don't go too fast, Billie," she exclaimed, as they turned the corner of Cliff Street, and whirled down the steep, rather slippery Main street of West Haven. "Remember that you have got a decrepit old woman in the back who has never

ridden behind anything faster than a pair of ambling carriage horses in all her life."

"How about the five-thirty express, Cousin Helen?" Billie called over her shoulder.

"A locomotive with an engineer is a very different thing from a young girl guiding a scarlet comet," the little lady answered; but as they left the street for the country road and Billie gradually increased the speed, Miss Campbell leaned back with a look of blissful enjoyment on her face.

"It is one of the most exhilarating things I have ever experienced," she confided to Elinor.

At noon they stopped for lunch. The road now lay along a high cliff overlooking the ocean, which on this calm September morning was as serenely blue and still as a mill pond. White sails dotted it here and there, and an occasional wave rippled on the pebbly beach with a murmuring, drowsy sound.

They had pulled up at the side of a little pine grove just off the road and spread the lunch cloth on a carpet of pine needles.

Then the delicious cakes and sandwiches which

Miss Campbell had ordered from Mrs. Price were arranged in neat piles, while Elinor opened her tea basket, a present from an aunt in Ireland, and made tea for the company.

It was all very delightful and they were enjoying themselves thoroughly, when Billie and Nancy, who were seated facing the others, received a slight shock. A tall, slender woman, dressed in black, with a long black chiffon veil completely concealing her face, suddenly emerged from behind a clump of dwarf oak and bay trees at the far end of the grove and beckoned to them.

The two girls exchanged glances of amazement and Nancy was about to say: "Why, look at that woman!" when the woman, herself, put her finger to her lips and shook her head violently.

"I think she's crazy, Nancy," said Billie, in a low voice, under cover of the conversation of the others. "We had better not take any notice. It would just alarm Cousin Helen and spoil the day."

Nancy agreed with her, and the two girls were about to suggest that they start on again, when the woman began making the most extraordinary

motions of entreaty, imploring them with outstretched arms, beseeching them with every gesture to come to her. And still the two girls hung back. Then the woman raised the sleeve of her loose black silk wrap and showed her arm bound with a bloody handkerchief.

Nancy gasped at this. The sight of blood was always sickening to her. But, seeing Billie's meaning glance in Miss Campbell's direction, she pretended that she had choked on her tea.

The other three were deep in a conversation. Miss Campbell was describing a beautiful ball she had once been to where she had danced with a real prince, and they hardly noticed when Nancy and Billie strolled over to the clump of bushes.

The woman, who had been waiting for them, seized Billie's arm and in a low, rapid voice said:

"I see that you are both unusually nice girls whom I can trust. I am in great trouble. You will help me, will you not? It is very simple, what I am going to ask you. You see, I have been in a wreck."

"A motor wreck?" asked Billie.

"Yes, yes," replied the woman, not impatiently

but as if she were very much pressed for time. "The car rolled over the embankment. You will see it below there. It happened just in the curve of the road. There was no excuse except that we were going too fast and the wheels did—what is it you call it? Skidded? We saved ourselves, all three, by jumping. Fortunately the back wheels were caught in the sand and there was just time to climb out as the car was overturned. The others have left me. They will return at any moment now with another car. Hidden under the seat of the wrecked car is a small box. I must have it. I must indeed. I cannot get it myself. I have sprained my knee, and can stand only by supporting myself against this tree. Will you get that box for me and place me in your debt always, always? You cannot understand how important it is for me to have it."

"Of course, we will," Billie assured her, "and won't you let us help you over to our party, or make you comfortable here with the cushions until your friends come back?"

"No, no, no," replied the stranger. "I do not

wish to be seen if possible. I only beg you to make haste. I will wait here."

As the woman grew more in earnest, her voice seemed to deepen and vibrate like a musical instrument, and the girls almost forgot to listen to her words under the spell of its wonderful tones; and when she threw back her veil, they still stood rooted to the spot, for she was really quite the most beautiful person they had either of them ever seen. Her eyes and hair were dark, her skin rather creamy in texture; there was a generous curve to her lips, a straight nose and full, rounded chin. She smiled a little as she noticed the admiration of the two girls, showing two rows of white, even teeth.

"You will not refuse?" she asked again.

And they helped her to sit down on the ground and hurried out of the grove to the roadside. There, sure enough, lying on its side in the sand, some forty feet below the road, was the wrecked motor car.

"Nancy, I would do anything for her," ob-

served Billie, as they clambered down the embankment.

"Isn't she perfect?" exclaimed Nancy. "And still, Billie, I can't help believing that she's slightly off in her upper story. She was so queer. But a shock like that would be enough to turn anybody delirious, jumping out of an automobile as it turned over an embankment."

"It'll all depend on whether we find the box. If it is just a delirious dream, there won't be any box and we will have had our climb for nothing."

They searched the upturned car and there was nothing in it. The ground was strewn with wreckage. Cushions and rugs were scattered about in wild confusion. The girls searched the place hurriedly all the way down to the foot of the cliff.

"There is no need of wasting any more time, Nancy, dear," said Billie at last. "It's very evident to me that the beautiful lady was out of her mind and we've been 'stung,' as the boys say. Let's go back. Perhaps she will let us help her get somewhere."

"Yes, I am afraid it's just a case of King



Half buried in the sand was a small box of highly polished wood.

George's men marched up the hill and then marched down again," said Nancy.

"And I got two grass stains when I fell down just now," added Billie, looking ruefully at her white serge skirt.

"My shoes are full of sand, and I've soiled my white stockings," went on Nancy. "Look," she cried suddenly; "look, Billie, here it is right under our noses. I suppose that little bay tree hid it from us on our way down. I ask the beautiful lady's pardon; but I still can't imagine why her own friends couldn't have got it for her just as well as we could."

Half buried in the sand was a small box of highly polished wood, six or eight inches square. Two broad bands of silver reinforced it at the back and sides, and a little silver combination lock took the place of the keyhole. In the middle of the box was a small, round silver plate, on which a coat of arms was engraved.

"This is the box, all right enough," said Billie, examining it with much curiosity. "Now let's return it to that mysterious lovely person and go on our ways, rejoicing."

But they were not destined to get rid of the box that day nor for many another day. Just as they reached the top of the cliff they heard the whirring of a motor engine. A car was just starting from the grove. Two men were on the front seat, while the owner of the box was lying almost helplessly in the back seat, her veil thrown back and her face white and drawn. There was no top to the car and the girls could see her plainly. They thought she must have fainted, but when Nancy called: "Wait, please wait," she raised herself quickly, put her finger to her lips in token of silence and dropped a card into the road.

The next instant the strange motor car was lost to sight around the curve. Billie picked up the card with some irritation.

"How silly," she exclaimed. "What are we to do with this thing? Why couldn't she have waited a minute?"

"Because she didn't want the men to know she had the box, goosey," answered Nancy. "It's as plain as the nose on your face. What does the card say?"

It was a man's business card and read:

“Pierre Lafitte, Avocat,
Rue — 21. Paris.”

On the back of the card had been painfully written with a pencil:

“I knew when you were gone so long that you would be too late. If you are merciful and kind, keep the box a secret from all the world. You will not regret it. Send your name to this address and you shall be relieved at once.”

“Burdened with another secret,” cried Billie, in a resigned voice. “Where can we hide the thing?”

“I'll sit on it for the time being,” answered Nancy, laughing. “There come the girls.”

“What are you two infants up to?” called Elinor, appearing just then at the edge of the grove. “We thought you had gone in the other direction and we've been looking everywhere for you.”

“We have—er——” hesitated Billie, who never could tell fibs. “What have we been doing, Nancy?”

"We've been looking at a wreck. Don't you want to see it?"

"Nancy Brown," cried her friend Mary, putting her hands on Nancy's shoulders and gazing into her face, "you've got a secret. I can tell by your expression. You are hiding something."

"I'm trying to hide it, but I find it rather difficult. I feel like a bantam hen sitting on a goose egg."

"Let's push her off her goose egg," cried Eleanor, "and see what it really is."

"Help, Billie, help!" screamed Nancy, while the four friends engaged in a school girl romp, and Miss Campbell, who was dozing in the grove, half opened her eyes and smiled.

"Is there anything more charming and sweeter than the sound of children's voices out of doors?" she said to herself. She could never get used to the idea that Billie was not still the little eight-year-old girl who had spent a summer in West Haven seven years before.

In the meantime, the guardian of the box was well defended by Billie until she began to laugh, and when Nancy was taken with the giggles her

father used to say she was nothing but an abandoned lunatic. The place rang with the joyous peals and the other girls were obliged to pause in the struggle and join in. Then this foolishly happy child rolled helplessly onto the ground, upsetting the box.

But there came a sudden end to the laughter, for the top of the box had sprung open and its contents were scattered on the roadside.

The girls clasped their hands excitedly and gazed at each other with wide-eyed amazement, for at their feet glittered dozens of the most beautiful jewels. There were a diamond and sapphire necklace, strings of pearls, earrings, rings, and broaches.

“Great heavens, what have you girls been doing?” exclaimed Mary.

“Nancy, you explain,” answered Billie, grown very grave, all of a sudden. “I’ll gather these things up and get them out of sight as quickly as possible. I think my suit case is the safest place for the time being, and we can take it into the front of the car with us. Then we can discuss later what we had better do.”

While the girls listened to Nancy's strange story of the beautiful injured woman, Billie collected and replaced the jewels in the box with the card, and packed it in the bottom of her suit case.

In another ten minutes the motor party was on the road again, the younger members somewhat sobered by the secret responsibility which had been thrust upon them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOX OF TROUBLES.

Shell Island is really only an island in name. A narrow creek which fills and empties with the incoming and outgoing tides divides it from the mainland. A bridge spans this chasm over which flows a constant stream of motor and driving parties from all the villages and summer resorts up and down the coast.

Just at sundown, as the "Comet" took the steep road down the cliff to the bridge, a big touring car shot past.

"Oh, dear," exclaimed Nancy, "I did hope we would leave all care behind when we came away, and now I am perfectly certain that Belle Rogers was sitting on the front seat of that automobile. I suppose she'll be floating around the ballroom in blue chiffons this evening."

"Is she a care?" asked Billie, who had a placid

and rather masculine way of forgetting all about the people she didn't like.

"Oh, I don't mind her, only she always makes me feel like a rag picker's daughter."

"I think she's over-dressed," put in Billie. "I should feel utterly foolish with all that finery and jewelry on me. When papa and I used to buy my clothes, he would say: 'Suppose we stick to plain white, daughter, and skip the furbelows. We can't go very far wrong if we do that, and if my little daughter begins to put on ruffles and puffles and falals without anybody's advice but mine, I'm afraid she might be taken for a walking fashion plate and some one will try to stand her up in a shop window.'"

Nancy laughed.

"I think you have the prettiest dresses I ever saw, Billie, but I am glad Miss Campbell has persuaded you to stop dressing so much like a boy. Lace collars are lots more becoming than those stiff linen ones."

"They were chokers," answered Billie, good-naturedly, as the car drew up at the steps of the

hotel immediately behind the automobile which had passed it on the road.

Belle and her party were waiting on the piazza, the women in long pongee coats with the very latest motor bonnets and veils.

“Those are her rich friends, the Jordannes,” whispered Nancy, in awed tones. “They used to be just plain Jordan before they made so much money.”

“I think Jordan is a much nicer name. It has such a fine Oriental sound, ‘Where rolls the River Jordan.’ ”

By this time several porters from the hotel had stepped to the motor car door and assisted Miss Campbell, somewhat stiff from the long ride, to alight. The girls jumped nimbly out after her and their luggage was unstrapped and piled on the ground near the Jordanne luggage. But Billie was careful to keep a firm hold on her own suit case with its precious load.

“Let the man take your bag, dear,” called Miss Campbell. “You will strain your back carrying that heavy thing.”

There was nothing for Billie to do but resign

the suit case, although she tried to keep an eye on it as they followed the porter through the lobby to the elevator. Miss Campbell had telegraphed ahead for rooms.

As luck would have it, there was another elevator for luggage, and the bag was temporarily out of Billie's sight, but her mind was soon at ease when she saw it stacked with the others in the bedroom which she and Nancy were to share.

"While we dress for dinner," she observed, "we'll have a talk about that jewelry. What on earth are we going to do with it?"

"Don't you think we'd better tell Miss Campbell?" suggested Elinor.

"I suppose it would be best, but Cousin Helen does go off so about things, and I have a feeling that if she knew it she wouldn't allow us to keep our promise to our poor beautiful lady. She would be sure to turn the box over to the police or call in a lawyer or something. And if we could only keep the box until we heard from the man in Paris, at least, we should be keeping our word about it."

Elinor and Mary were all for telling, but the

other girls were still under the spell of the very beautiful and distressed woman, and since it was mostly their affair they concluded not to tell.

You must not blame Billie for this want of frankness. Girls who have never had mothers to talk to in the intimate way that only a mother and daughter know, are apt to be reserved and self-reliant. Billie would certainly have told her father, but, then, he was in Russia.

Mary and Elinor, whose room adjoined the other, had put on their kimonos and were lolling on the beds, while Nancy with solicitous care was removing her pretty muslin frock from the valise and smoothing out the pink taffeta ribbons tenderly.

Billie knelt on the floor and opened her suit case.

“Before I undress,” she said decisively, “I’m going to take this box straight down stairs and give it to the clerk to put in the safe. Then we can spend the evening with easy minds.”

She flung back the top and sat down on the floor with a gasp.

"In the name of all the powers, this is not my suit case."

The girls gathered around her in great excitement.

"It's exactly like mine," she went on, "but there are no initials on it and mine has 'W.H.C.' on the end."

"Girls," cried Nancy, flinging her bathrobe around her with a tragic gesture, "the very last person in the world we could wish to have Billie's suit case is the very one who has it. She'll look at everything in it; examine the underclothes to see if they are hand-made and the stockings to see if they are silk, and—she'll open the box of jewels and read the card of the *avocat* from Paris and _____"

"Who? Who?" interrupted the other three.

"Who but Belle Rogers," cried Nancy, flourishing a towel in one hand and a hair brush in the other.

"Yes, that's her costume," admitted Mary, laughing. "Blue chiffon with a wreath of pink roses for her hair."

She pulled up a corner of the pale blue gauzy

material and pointed to a little pink wreath which lay in the folds of the dress.

"There are her blue satin slippers, No. Two's, absolutely not a size larger," said Elinor, pointing to the toe of a little slipper which showed at one end of the suit case.

"This is what I get for losing the keys to everything," groaned Billie. "Telephone for a boy, quick, some one, while I fasten this thing up. Perhaps she hasn't opened mine yet."

"Opened it!" echoed the others. "You don't know her."

Presently a bell boy tapped at the door.

Billie gave him the suit case with full instructions.

"And hurry," she added. "If you are back here in five minutes, you shall have an extra tip."

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. The other girls were almost dressed, and Billie was beginning to tap the floor nervously with an impatient foot, when at last there was a tap at the door.

"Why didn't you come sooner?" demanded Nancy and Billie in one voice.

"The young lady wouldn't let me, Miss."

"But what was she doing all that time?"

"I don't know, Miss. She simply told me to wait outside. She was very angry, Miss, about her bag."

"Angry, indeed," answered Billie, seizing her own suit case. "At least no time was lost in sending it to her."

The two girls opened the suit case with great anxiety. The things in it were assuredly in rather a rumpled condition. They had the appearance of having been unfolded and hastily rolled up again in new folds.

Nothing could be told about the box of jewels. They were all there apparently in a glittering bunch with the card laid on top.

"Dear me, I'm sorry that combination lock broke," exclaimed Billie. "I don't mind Belle Rogers looking through my clothes if it gives her any satisfaction, but I would just as soon she hadn't looked into this box of jewels. And we can't explain to her, because we mustn't seem to know that she was capable of doing anything so low and common as to go through my suit case."

She dressed herself hastily in a pretty white

frock. Her smooth rolls of hair and trim braid did not need re-arranging, and she hurried down-stairs to the desk with the troublesome box, which she gave into the charge of the clerk.

“These are some really valuable things,” she said. “Will you put them in your safe?”

The clerk wrapped the box up neatly in heavy brown paper, sealed it with red sealing wax, labelled it with her name and address and deposited it in the safe.

“That’s off my mind,” she said, giving a sigh of relief, just as the elevator door opened and Miss Campbell appeared with the other girls.

“Cousin Helen, you’re a dream,” cried Billie, taking her cousin’s arm. “You are like a young girl whose hair had gone and turned white in a single night.”

“Thank you, my dear, but you may be sure that if anything happened which could make my hair turn white in a night, it wouldn’t leave me any girlish looks. But why didn’t you come to my room and let me have a look at you? Are you all exactly right and in place? That’s a sweet little frock. I suppose you got it in Paris last sum-

mer. You and your father are a pair of children shopping together, I imagine. All my girls look sweet," she added, not wishing to wound any feelings by admiring one more than another. "See this lovely dress my little Mary is wearing. Could anything be more exquisitely made than that? Your mother is a wonderful woman, child. There's nobody like her in West Haven."

At dinner there was another surprise for the girls. This time it was an agreeable one: four extra places at the table, and presently they were joined by four West Haven boys, looking rather embarrassed but quite happy as they shook hands with the fairy godmother of the party, Billie's Cousin Helen.

Two of the boys we have met before, Ben Austen and Charlie Clay. The other two were their intimate friends and boon companions, Americus Brown, Nancy's brother, known as "Merry Brown," and Percival Algernon St. Clair, whose mother's fancy had run riot in naming her only child. He was called "Percy" by his friends for short.

"Why, look who's here," exclaimed Nancy.

"Percival Algernon St. Clair, why didn't you tell us yesterday when you gave us soda water at the drug store that you were coming on this trip, too?"

"Because it was secret," answered Percy, who was very blond and blushed easily. "Miss Campbell wanted to surprise you."

"I thought it would be nice for my girls to have some partners for the dance to-night," said Miss Campbell. "I wanted to see some real dancing."

"If you want to see the real thing, then, Miss Campbell," said Merry Brown, "if you want to see the poetry of motion, you must see Ben dance."

"Shut up, bow-legs," called Ben across the table. "I've been learning for months. I took lessons last summer."

"Where?" demanded his friends, because at the school dances, Ben's expression of misery was well known when he towed an unfortunate friend around the room.

"I know," said Percy, "it's all explained now. That's what you were doing at the Dutch picnics every week."

"Well, they were pretty good teachers," replied the imperturbable Ben. "They taught me that guiding a girl in a dance was very much like sailing a boat with a windmill for a sail. You have to guide and twirl at the same time, and the more speed you make in twirling the better your dancing is."

Everybody laughed uproariously at this description.

"Ben Austen, I didn't expect to be treated like a windmill sail boat when I promised to give you my first dance," announced Elinor.

"It would be better than to be treated like a stationary windmill and go turning around in one place like the Germans dance," observed Billie.

"You may all have your choice," said Ben. "Stationary or progressive, it's all one to me, only remember that you have each promised to do a Dutch twirl with me."

The ballroom was already quite filled with dancers and it seemed very bewildering and delightful to the young girls, if it was only a summer hotel with a piano and two violins and a flute for

an orchestra. Ben's Dutch whirl was so skillfully performed, because like everything else he attempted he had mastered it perfectly, that the girls found it rather exciting fun.

"It's a regular romp," cried Billie, who, with glowing cheeks, dropped breathlessly into a chair beside her Cousin Helen.

"Look," whispered Mary Price, who had been dancing a quiet glide with Charlie Clay and had had a chance to notice some of the other dancers.

For some reason both their young faces turned suddenly very grave. Was it a strange, unexplained premonition that told them the most dangerous enemy either was ever to have was dancing past that moment, in floating pale blue chiffon draperies?

After the dance there was a merry supper party with sandwiches and lemonade in the grill room, and then the Motor Maids were glad enough to get to their beds.

"What a relief it is, Nancy, dear, to have that box of jewels in the safe," said Billie sleepily, as her eyelids drooped and she settled herself under the covers.

But Nancy did not reply. She was sleeping deeply. Billie, too, was soon oblivious of everything in the world.

As the night wore on, Nancy dreamed that she was dancing the Dutch twirl in a wonderful blue gauze dress, but that the diamond necklace she wore so weighed her down that she could not breathe.

Billie also dreamed of the diamonds. They were not around her neck, but in their box, which had grown to the size of a trunk and pressed on her chest so heavily that she was suffocating.

Suddenly a great bell clanged out in the night.

Billie opened her eyes with difficulty. The room was filled with smoke and down the corridor there came the cry of "Fire! Fire!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRE.

A bell with a deep baying note rang out in the darkness.

If you have ever heard a fire bell boom out in the stillness, you will remember the terror which clutched your heart at the first ominous peal. It seemed to Billie, in going over it afterward, that the boom of that big fire bell was like the last trump on the day of judgment arousing the spirits of the dead.

Then came the sound of voices. The corridors were filled with hurrying footsteps. Somebody ran down the hallway calling again:

“Fire! Fire!”

Billie jumped to the floor with a bound. Her senses had returned at last.

“Nancy, Nancy!” she cried, shaking her friend violently back to consciousness. “The hotel is on

fire. Get into your dressing gown as quickly as you can while I wake up the others."

As she switched on the light she saw that the room was filled with smoke, and she knew the fire must be in their wing of the hotel and that there was no time to lose.

There is no better fire trap in the world than a wooden hotel at the seaside. The salt from the flying spray in winter storms has seasoned the wood into splendid burning material, and the breeze from the ocean fans the flames like a great natural bellows.

As Billie waked the other girls Miss Campbell came into the room, with a white, scared face. But she was not excited.

"Get into your dressing gowns, girls," she said quietly. "Don't lose a moment's time. The boys are waiting for us outside."

Just then Ben Austen rattled on the door.

"Hurry," he called. "The elevators won't run much longer and the stairs are burning."

Hardly two minutes had passed since the first clang of the bell when Miss Campbell and the girls joined the boys in the corridor. There had

not been time even to snatch up a hair-pin from the bureau to catch tumbled locks together. But nobody looked at any one else. The place was crowded with hotel guests in exactly the same condition and all the passages opening into the main corridor of the hotel were emptying themselves of streams of people in every state of disarray. If it had been less serious, the girls might have laughed at the numbers of terrified and hysterical fat women, wrapping insufficient dressing gowns and blankets about their large forms as they pushed their way without ceremony toward the elevators.

But a big tongue of flame suddenly leapt up the stairwell at the end of the hall. There was a crackling sound and clouds of black smoke poured into the corridor.

“We must get out of this,” exclaimed Ben. “The fire has reached this floor and unless we knock a few people down, we’ll never get to either of those elevators.”

“But where are the fire escapes?” demanded Miss Campbell.

"At the end of the hall," answered Charlie, "and we could never get past that burning pit."

The two elevators had been up and down several times, packed with people. The smoke was growing thicker each moment, and the next thing Billie remembered was that Elinor had fainted dead away, and that some one had screamed:

"The elevators have stopped running!"

In the stifling atmosphere she saw Ben and Charlie lift Elinor and call to the others to follow them into a bedroom. As she staggered after them, a grotesque figure, screaming hysterically, fought through the crowd, almost knocking Billie down. Even in that moment of danger she recognized Belle Rogers, every lock of whose golden hair was done up on red rubber curlers, the ends of which stuck straight up like scores of little devils' horns.

"Take me down! Take me down!" Billie heard her scream. "I will not die in this horrible way! Somebody save me!"

Billie touched her on the shoulder.

"Don't scream," she said. "It only makes

things worse. The people who are left are going to get down by the windows. Come with us."

Belle, who had been separated from her friends, followed quietly enough.

In another moment the corridor was empty, and the flames which had been fast eating their way along the hall had reached the elevator shafts. It had all happened in much less time than it takes to tell, but in the brief instant when Billie had paused to rescue Belle, she lost the others. Once in a bedroom, where the air was not so stifling, it was impossible to leave and rush again into the atmosphere outside.

The two girls dashed into the nearest room and closed the door, too stifled to notice that the others, led by level-headed Ben and followed by the crowd of people left standing by the elevator shafts, had rushed into a front room at the end of the hall. In the closets of this room and the one adjoining, they found two fire ropes which this old-fashioned hotel provided for its guests whose rooms were not located near the fire escapes. Those who were not able to slide down the ropes were lowered in a chair, and the others, with a

foot twisted around the rope and grasping a wet towel to keep the palm of the hand from blistering, slid down. In the darkness it was impossible to recognize faces, and it was not until they were all safe on the ground that they missed Billie Campbell.

Then poor Miss Campbell, who had been admirably calm during the whole fearful experience, fainted away, and Elinor, now entirely restored by the fresh air, was left to take care of her.

Nancy and Mary followed the four boys to the rescue. Tears were rolling down Nancy's cheeks and Mary was as pale as death. Each girl had her own peculiar way of showing how much she had come to love their new friend, Billie.

In the meantime, Billie, herself, was looking ruefully down into the darkness from the window of a room on the third floor and Belle was indulging in a fit of real hysterics.

"How dare you bring me here?" she screamed hoarsely, stamping her foot. "I might have been saved if you had let me alone, and here we are

trapped! I always hated you and now I detest you with my whole soul."

"I thought the others were in here," said Billie apologetically.

"Thought! Thought!" screamed the wretched girl. "You wanted me to die. You wanted me to lose my beauty."

"You haven't any to lose just now," answered Billie. "You look more like the Medusa of the snaky locks——"

"Oh, oh!" wept Belle, too angry to articulate.

"You may console yourself this much," went on Billie. "If you die, I shall die with you, but I am going to do my best to save you and myself, too."

"Help! Help!" screamed Belle from the window, not taking any notice. But her voice was lost in the wild clamor which came up from below.

Then she flung herself flat on the floor in an agony of sobs.

"It's better to pray than to cry, Belle. Crying won't help and we are in a pretty warm place. If you were only a sport, it might do a lot of good."

Belle crawled to the window and leaned out. The air in the room was becoming unbearable.

In the meantime, Billie's thoughts were working rapidly. There were the sheets, but there wasn't time to tear them into strips and knot the strips together. Besides, she didn't believe they would reach halfway to the ground.

"I am afraid we'll have to climb it," she said.

"Climb what?"

"Climb up the side of the shutter to the roof. This is the top floor. The flames haven't reached the roof yet."

"But what good will the roof do us?"

"I don't know yet, but it's better than this. Come on."

"I tell you I can't climb. I never did such a thing in my life."

"You'll just have to begin then," said Billie sternly. "Shall I go first, or would you rather do it?"

"I'll go—no, you go."

"I'll help you," said Billie, hoisting herself to the window ledge. "Now, don't look down. Just imagine you are only a few feet from the ground

and that it's a very easy stunt. If you decide beforehand that you can't do it, why, of course, you can't. But it will be much easier than staying here to be burned alive in the next few minutes."

Delivering herself of this boyish but unimpeachable logic, Billie kicked off her slippers and swung herself onto the shutter. Just for one brief instant a sickening nausea came over her as she looked down into the darkness.

Then her fingers grasped the cornice of the roof and, pulling herself up with her two arms, as she had learned to do on the parallel bars in the gymnasium—only in this instance the shutter made a very uncertain elbow rest—she scrambled onto the roof.

"All right, Belle," she called. "It's much easier than I thought. Take off your slippers and come ahead, and don't forget to look up and not down."

Belle obeyed in sullen silence. She was as determined as Billie not to be burned alive, but her luxurious and self-indulgent nature revolted against this uncomfortable and dangerous method of getting out of the difficulty. However, there

was nothing else to do, so she swung out on the shutter as Billie had done, only this time Billie, with all the strength in her body was holding the shutter rigid.

As Belle clung on with her hands and her little pink toes, which she had stuck into the interstices of the shutter, she suddenly looked down. Her grasp weakened and she gave a shriek so piercing that Billie almost slipped headlong over the side of the roof, but she grasped Belle's slackening wrist.

"Take a breath," she said, in a trembling voice. "You can do it, if you only make up your mind to."

"I'll never, never forgive you," cried Belle, "and if I live through to-night, I'll pay you back."

"All right," answered Billie calmly, seeing all at once that anger appeared to give Belle new strength, "only I advise you to get onto this roof first."

Another moment and Belle had clambered over the cornice and was stretched out breathless on the roof.

"I would much rather have had a baby to look

after," thought Billie, as she looked contemptuously down at the other girl.

"We had better not lose any more time now, Belle," she said aloud. "If you have got your breath and your nerve back, come ahead."

Belle pulled herself wearily up and followed.

"My feet are all splinters," she complained, "and my hands are torn and bleeding."

"'Tis the voice of the lobster: I heard him declare

'You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair,' "

repeated Billie, half laughing and half sobbing that this foolish verse should have flashed through her brain at this strange time.

The two girls hurried along the roof toward the front. It was plain that in the scramble to save the lives of the hotel guests there had been no time to save the building, and when the young girls turned the corner of the roof and looked for a moment across the broad expanse of ocean not a hundred yards away it seemed to them that they were alone in the whole world.

"What are we going to do now?" demanded Belle.

"I don't know yet," answered Billie patiently.

The roof was hot under her feet and they could hear the crackling of flames as they hastened along the edge to the other side.

The rest of that fearful adventure seemed like a dream to Billie afterwards.

As they turned the corner of the house a voice called hoarsely:

"Who can tie a rope?"

Billie remembered to have replied vaguely and politely that she could tie a rope. A man emerged from behind the chimney with a long rope, but she hardly noticed at the time that he had only one arm.

"It may not be long enough," he said, "but tie it and we'll take the risk. It's our only chance."

Billie knotted the rope around the chimney. The man examined the knot carefully, pulled it with his one hand, and then threw it over the side of the house.

"I'll go first," said Belle quietly, and Billie looked at her with amazement.

"Humph!" said the man. "You are brave. Can you do it?"

"Yes," answered Belle, "I can do anything. Help me over the side."

"It's going to hurt," he observed, as he twisted the rope around her foot and showed her how to slide down. "It's going to take all the skin off your hands and feet and maybe cut to the bone."

Belle made no reply to this cheerful prediction. She had already started down the rope.

As Billie watched her disappear in the dark, the man said abruptly:

"Did a number of girls and a white-haired woman in a red automobile come here this evening?"

Billie hesitated.

"I believe so," she said.

"Do you know so?" asked the man insistently.

"Yes."

"Did you see one of them leave a rosewood box at the clerk's desk?"

Billie made a great effort to remember. Then, suddenly, the case of jewels loomed up in her mind. She had forgotten all about them.

"Billie, Billie," called a voice from below.

"Yes," she answered, looking over the roof.

"She's here," shouted Ben, from the top of the ladder, which reached only to the second story.

"All right," called the one-armed man on the roof. "We have a rope here. We'll swing down to the ladder."

The next thing Billie remembered she was surrounded by a crowd of her friends at the foot of the ladder. The girls were weeping and her Cousin Helen was giving vent to hysterical expressions of relief and thankfulness. The wet sand felt cool and soft to the parched soles of her bare feet, and she tried to smile; but she really had quite forgotten what it was all about. Some one close by her groaned and sobbed alternately, and a sickening feeling came over her when she saw a girl stretched on a blanket almost at her feet. The girl's hands were torn and bleeding and her pale blue silk kimono was covered with blood. Down one cheek was a long, bloody mark and to complete her grotesque and terrible aspect, at least a dozen little red rubber devils' horns stood upright all over her head.

The next thing Billie remembered was huddling into her own beloved red motor car with the others, while some one took them somewhere, and all the time in her ears she heard a man's voice saying:

“Where is that box of jewels?”

And her own voice replied:

“Under the ruins of the Shell Island Hotel.”

CHAPTER VIII.

NANCY'S HOME.

Nancy's home was a favorite meeting place of the four friends. There was something very inviting about the old red brick house, with its low-ceiled, cheerful rooms and deep-silled windows.

Nancy's family had been seafaring people for many generations, and the place was filled with curios from foreign countries: carved chests, swords with curved blades, ivory elephants, funny little cross-legged grinning gods, beautiful Japanese vases and Oriental rugs.

In cool weather there seemed to be a perpetual piece of old driftwood crackling on the hearth, and there was nothing the girls enjoyed more than sitting in a row on the floor in front of that cheerful blaze while they drank tea from curious Japanese cups and nibbled some of Mrs. Brown's delicate cookies.

Nancy's father was the very picture of a sea

captain, sunburned, ruddy, eyes very blue and little side whiskers like an English Squire's. He had a hundred stories to tell of the sea, and Billie could have listened to him all day without tiring. Nancy's mother was a gay, cheerful little body who kept her house polished like a ship's cabin, and Nancy's brother, Merry, was the image of his father. He felt the call of the sea, too, as his father and grandfather had before him, but he was not to be the captain of a merchant ship. He intended to go to Annapolis.

Three weeks had passed since the great fire at Shell Island, when, one Saturday afternoon, a red motor car wound its way in and out of the country vehicles on Main Street, stopped at the express office, where the young mistress of the car alighted for a moment, returning with a package, and then, with a reckless flourish, turned into lower Cliff Street and presently stopped in front of Nancy's house.

Billie entered without ceremony, so intimate had she now become with the Brown household. Concealing the package in her gray ulster, she left it in the hall. Then, with the boyish freedom

which seemed to characterize all her ways, pulling off her gray hat and gloves, she marched into the parlor.

Nancy was huddled up on the settle doing the family darning, a Saturday task she loathed. Elinor was playing softly on the square piano between the front windows and Mary Price was reading a book.

"I hope I don't disturb any one," said Billie, laughing as she burst into the room. "Everybody seems to be so busy here. I'm the only idle creature living to-day. Even Cousin Helen is at work."

"I hope she is doing something more to her taste than this," said Nancy mournfully. "I'd rather dig for clams any day. Merry would wear out a sock made of steel chains."

"Hark, a doleful voice from the tombs," cried Merry, who always made it an excuse to hunt for something in the parlor when Billie appeared.

"It's the truth," complained Nancy. "If you would just keep still two minutes at a time, I wouldn't have to give up my Saturdays slaving for you."

“‘When I hear the music play, I can’t keep right still,’” sang Merry, executing a double shuffle on the floor to a jig tune Elinor had struck up.

“You’ll have to dance to a different tune when you go to Annapolis,” cried Nancy. “And who’ll do your darning there?”

“Don’t borrow trouble, Nancy,” answered her brother. “Perform your daily task and cease to murmur. You’ll be a professional grumbler like Belle Rogers if you keep on.”

“Do you know that she and her whole family are denouncing me as a sort of would-be murderer?” put in Billie. “All because I lost Ben and the rest of you at the Shell Island fire and took her into the wrong room.”

“I heard that she was an early Christian martyr who had come near to being burned at the stake,” said Merry.

“Yes,” continued Billie, “she tells how I enticed her into the room, and then climbed up onto the roof and left her, so that she had to follow and she even blames me because she would slide down the rope first and cut her hands so that she

will never be able to play the piano. I am very sorry for that, because she liked music, but it was her own fault."

"It's really making a sort of split-up in the town," observed Elinor. "Mrs. Rogers and mamma almost had words on the subject the other day. As much as mamma will ever have words with any one. Mrs. Rogers tried to tell her that Belle was going one way and you made her go another, and all mamma said was, 'My dear Julia, I have heard the correct version of the story,' and swept away."

"Exactly as you will do, Elinor, when you begin to wear long dresses," said Nancy.

"Oh, she can sweep without a train," cried Merry, giving a very good imitation of Elinor as he made for the door with his baseball bat and glove.

"Now, don't be silly, Americus Brown," called Elinor after him. "Remember that you are to be a soldier of the nation some day, and you'll have to stop walking pigeon-toed, then, and keep your bow-legs straight and stop grinning. It will be very difficult, I fear."

Merry shot a coffee bean at her with his thumb and forefinger as he left the room.

"That boy will be the death of me," exclaimed Nancy. "He reminds me of our sailor weather-cock in the garden that waves his arms and legs and turns every time there is the slightest breeze."

"He's a nice boy," said Billie, who always took Merry's side in the arguments. "But I am here this morning, as the preacher says, to ask your advice in a grave matter. Several grave matters, in fact."

"Have you heard from Mr. Lafitte?" demanded the three girls in unison.

"No," said Billie, "and it's been nearly three weeks since we sent my name and address. Perhaps there hasn't been time, but I should think they might have cabled, or something."

"It only postpones the evil day of telling them the jewels were lost in the fire," observed Mary.

Billie disappeared in the hall for a moment and returned with the package she had hidden in her ulster.

"The jewels came back by express this morning," she said.

"For heaven's sake!" cried the others.

"I don't know whether to be glad or sorry," said Billie. "I am sure Pandora's box didn't have any more troubles locked inside of it than this one has. What shall I do with it now?"

"Why don't you tell Miss Campbell all about it?" suggested Elinor, for the second time.

"But, Elinor, it wouldn't be right," answered Billie. "Didn't we give the woman our word of honor, Nancy, that we would keep the box for her until she sent for it, and tell no one? Even you and Mary would not have known about it if you hadn't attacked Nancy like two wild Comanche Indians and knocked the box open."

"Don't you think the woman was crazy, honestly now?" Elinor asked for the hundredth time. This was an old argument between the girls.

"No, I don't," answered Billie emphatically.

"She was much too beautiful and fascinating to be crazy," put in Nancy.

"They are the craziest of all sometimes," said Elinor.

"But to return to the jewels," interrupted Mary, the peacemaker. "Did the hotel people send them back?"

"No, that's the queerest thing of all, and that's what I'm here for to tell you now. The hotel people wrote me a letter which came this morning, saying that it was believed that the fire had been started by thieves who robbed the safe and that they, therefore, were not responsible for things lost.

"In the same mail came another very nice letter from a strange man named Johnston. He said the night of the fire he saw a man who was carrying this package faint dead away on the bridge. He believes now the man was one of the thieves. Anyway, he took him into his automobile and the thief must have come to and not known where he was, because he escaped somehow, probably to go back and look for the package, which Mr. Johnston has expressed to me."

"Well, of all the strange stories!"

"But the question is now, what to do with the thing?" continued Billie.

If Billie had been a few years older, she would

probably have gone straight to Miss Campbell, or to Miss Campbell's lawyer, Mr. Richard Butler, Elinor's uncle, for advice. The jewels would then have been stored in the bank for safe-keeping and proper means taken to find the owner. But it seemed to her that having given her word she must keep it, and hide the jewels herself in some safe place until she heard from Mr. Lafitte. After all, he might be on a journey somewhere, and they could only wait patiently.

"Let's go and consult our guide, counsellor, and friend," suggested Mary.

"Who?" asked the other girls, in some doubt.

"Why, the motor car, of course. Isn't he the cheerfulness, finest friend in the world; always ready to give pleasure; always smiling and ruddy, and ready to come and go, stay still or move on—bless him?"

"He is a dear," said Billie, pleased with this extravagant praise of her beloved car.

The girls had come to consider "The Comet" almost as a living thing, like a pet horse or a favorite dog. They loved it as ardently as chil-

dren love a pony which has borne them all on his back at one time around the garden.

It was decided then to take a spin in the car and the four friends were soon in their accustomed places on the red leather seats.

The scarlet car, full of young girls, was no longer an unusual sight in the town of West Haven, and people had ceased now to turn and stare at the "Motor Maids," as Captain Brown had christened them one morning when they had taken him for a drive in the automobile.

Through the town they sped and out to the open road. The crisp autumn air nipped their cheeks and brought the color to their faces. As they passed Boulder Lane they looked curiously at the fisherman's house in the distance.

"I am certain those men who took your car were smugglers," announced Nancy. "Father says there are lots of them."

"Perhaps," said Billie, "and I am certain of another thing: that it was the same one-armed man who was on the roof of the hotel the night of the fire."

"But there are lots of one-armed men in the world, child," replied Nancy.

"Perhaps, but there was something familiar about him. And, besides, why did he ask me those questions about the girls at the hotel in the red automobile?"

"And, 'curiser and curiser,' what did he want with the box of jewels? And how did he know we had them?" said Elinor.

"I really couldn't say," answered Nancy. "Ask me something easier."

Seeing nothing ahead of them in the road, Billie had let the car go full speed. It was what they all loved, even Mary Price, who had gradually got over a certain timidity she used to feel when the car shot through the air like a skyrocket, and it was Mary Price now, grown unusually bold from familiarity with speeding, who suddenly jumped up and cried in her high, sweet voice:

"I've got it! I've got it!"

"Got what?" demanded the others.

"Why, a place to put the jewels in, of course. Mother's safe."

"But would she like us to use her safe?" asked Billie.

"She won't mind. I'll tell her it's something of yours. She never uses it. We haven't anything to keep in it now," Mary added simply. "Father used it in his life time and Mother has just kept it since because we are always expecting to make lots of money, you know, and then we might need it. I know the combination, and we can go straight home and put them in. No one would ever think of looking for jewels in our little house, and they ought to be as safe there as any place in the world."

"Mary, dear, you are a trump," exclaimed Billie. "It's a perfect idea."

In another moment, they had faced about and were on their way back to town.

"Dear old car," ejaculated Elinor, patting the red leather tenderly. "Mary's right, we couldn't get on without you. We consult you exactly as the ancients consulted oracles. I think all your cushions must be stuffed with good advice, instead of horse hair, and your big all-seeing eye is always on the lookout for danger——"

"And his heart is true to his jolly crew," sang Nancy.

"He is better than a horse," put in Mary, "because he never gets tired."

"And when he's empty we fill him with gasoline, and he'll go ahead as fresh as ever," went on Billie.

"And he always avoids broken glass and tacks in the road," Elinor was saying, when "bang!" went one of the rear tires with a report as loud as a pistol shot.

The "jolly crew" could not restrain their ever-ready laughter at this disconcerting behavior on the part of "The Comet" just at the very moment when their boasts were loudest.

"Oh, well," said Billie apologetically, "it's time we had a puncture. We've never had one yet. We'll take him to the garage and have him mended properly."

"Chocolates, marshmallows, peanut brittle, and other candies, fresh and dee-lishus!" called a voice from behind the motor as they pulled into the garage.

It was Percival Algernon St. Clair, wearing a

most engaging smile on his rosy, good-natured face, as he tipped his boyish cap at Nancy in particular in the most approved grown-up fashion.

"Have you any ice cream sodas, Percy-Algy?" demanded Nancy impudently.

"I don't think the fountain's dry yet, Nancy, and we'll have a party, if you say so. The gang is close by. Shall I give the signal?"

"I have no objections," said Nancy, "if the girls haven't."

"Why should we?" answered Billie. "Isn't pineapple soda water my favorite beverage?"

Percy put two fingers to his lips and gave three whistles, and, as if by magic, Ben Austen, Charlie Clay, and Merry Brown emerged from the shadow of a neighboring doorway.

In spite of his theatrical name, his girlish complexion, and blond hair, Percy was a great favorite with his friends. He had received a spoiling from his doting and indulgent mother that would have turned many another boy into a selfish, vain egoist. But Percy had been saved from this wretched fate partly by his own frank and engaging disposition and partly by association with

his three chums, Charlie, Ben, and Merry, wholesome, manly boys, who had never been molly-coddled in their lives.

"Will some one carry this parcel then?" asked Billie, pulling the box of jewels from under the seat, and tearing the wrapping paper off of a corner as she did so.

"I will," said Merry promptly, taking charge of the box. "Why, it's rather heavy," he observed, weighing it in his hand. "It must be full of gold nuggets."

Billie was silent. She was beginning to be a little superstitious about that box, and she could have wished that the punctured tire and the soda water party, pleasant as was this last diversion, had not interrupted their plan to store the box in Mrs. Price's safe.

But Billie enjoyed being with girls and boys of her own age so much that she soon forgot her doubts and joined in the gay conversation of the little company.

On Saturday afternoons a crowd of High School boys and girls was always congregated around the soda water fountain in the West

Haven Pharmacy, as it was called, and the place was filled with gay talk and laughter, when the Motor Maids and their friends pushed their way up to the marble counter, while Percy, who had more pocket money in a week than some of the others had in a year, paid for the checks.

As luck would have it, Billie and Americus Brown had found places next to Belle Rogers, who, very daintily and delicately, though with some thoroughness, was consuming a maple-nut sundae.

Merry pushed the box onto the counter while he plunged into a glass of chocolate soda water without even noticing that Belle had turned a scornful glance, first at him and then at the much soiled and travel-stained wrapper on the package. Then, suddenly, something very particular claimed her attention. Mary Price, who was standing around the curve of the counter, saw the whole thing and reported it later to the girls. Where Billie had torn the paper, the polished rosewood surface of the box, with its silver mounting, was plainly visible. Belle gave one long, astonished stare of recognition.

"After we leave this package at Mary's, I invite all of you to take a ride in the motor," Billie was saying to Merry Brown. "Do you think eight can sit where five are in the habit of sitting?"

"One seat will be big enough for the mid-gets,"—a nickname given to Mary and Charlie,—Merry answered. "One of us can sit on the floor and the other four can squeeze onto the back seat. The chauffeur is the only person who must have plenty of room."

"Can't you move up and give us a little room?" interrupted Nancy, pushing her way between her brother and his neighbor, while Percy stood patiently by with two glasses of soda water.

Without meaning it, she had jostled Belle Rogers. The two girls turned and faced each other.

"How do you do, Belle? Are you quite well again?" asked Nancy politely, but with a look in her eyes which meant mischief.

Belle had not been back to school since the fire.

"Miss Brown," said Belle, bowing stiffly.

"How well your hair stays in curl this foggy weather, Belle," continued Nancy, in a high, pleasant voice, which could be heard by all the boys and girls at the counter. "You must put it up almost every night now, don't you?"

"Nancy!" expostulated Billie, as Belle sailed from the drug store, followed by several of her loyal friends.

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE SIGN OF THE BLUE TEA POT.

Billie was thankful when they had got the box of jewels safely back into the motor car and were on their way at last to Mary's home.

Mary and her mother lived in a pretty old house facing the public square, and it was fortunate that Mrs. Price's old home was so located. In order to support herself and her little daughter, the young widow had transformed the lower floor into a tea room and shop. A little blue board hung from the portico, which bore the inscription in old English script, "At Ye Signe of Ye Blue Tea Pot." A large bulletin on the front door announced that tea and sandwiches of all varieties could be had within; also that luncheons were prepared for pleasure parties and journeys and that numerous dainty and pretty articles, made by hand, were there for sale.

The inscription might have stated further that

the plucky mistress of the little shop was as dainty and pretty as any of the articles for sale on the counter.

As the soda water fountain was the Saturday afternoon meeting place of the boys and girls of West Haven, so the Sign of the Blue Tea Pot attracted the older crowd. It had seemed a bold undertaking for the widow to mortgage her home and put all the money in the chintz hangings and wicker furniture of those two charming tea rooms. Her old friends, Mr. Butler and Captain Brown, had strongly advised against it, but her venture had been a success from the first, although a mortgage still hung over the place like a black cloud and small debts would accumulate every time she got a little ahead.

' When the red motor with its load of young people drew up at the door of Mary's home, the buzz of conversation from inside reached them out in the street.

Mary's mother appeared for a moment in the doorway, and smiled at them.

"She's as beautiful as an angel," thought Billie, who never told how often she had yearned for a real mother of her very own as other girls had.

Could any one else have looked so charming in a perfectly plain home-made gray chambray dress, with a white muslin fichu, and little white apron to set it off?

"Won't you come in and have some tea and cake, children?" Mrs. Price called to the young people, while she put an arm around Mary and shook hands with Billie, who had followed her friend to the front door with the troublesome box.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Price," replied Billie, as spokesman of the party. "I only came to ask a favor," she added, in a lower voice. "Would you let me keep this box in your safe for a while? I have no place, I mean——" Billie hesitated and blushed. Of all things, she detested subterfuge, and yet here she was making all sorts of lame excuses instead of saying frankly that she was keeping the box for a friend.

"You mean the old safe upstairs?" asked Mrs. Price, somewhat astonished.

"Yes, mother," put in Mary. "I told Billie I knew you wouldn't mind locking this box up for her for a while."

“Certainly, dear, you are welcome to hide anything in it you like. Mary knows the combination better than I do. I always have to look it up in one of Captain Price’s old note books. I am sorry you won’t have some tea and cake, but I suppose you are all off for a spin this afternoon. It has done Mary more good than I can tell you, your motor car. The child is always studying so hard to hurry up and be a teacher and take care of her old mother, so she says.”

“Only a few years more, Mother, and you shall never have to work again,” said Mary. “Some day I shall be the Principal of West Haven High School, when Miss Gray gets too old to work——”

“What’s this?” exclaimed Miss Gray herself, at the door. She had been drinking tea inside with some friends. “Who’s going to lay me on the shelf before my time?”

“Mary intends to step into your shoes, Miss Gray,” laughed Mrs. Price. “Look out for her. She is a dangerous rival. She means to pay off all our mortgages and things, and provide for her mother’s old age.”

Miss Gray pinched Mary's cheek.

"Yes," insisted Mary stoutly, "all I want is money, money, money."

The Principal patted the young girl's cheek kindly.

"Don't be too mad about it, child. It won't buy everything, you know."

It was only an idle speech of Mary's but you all know how much meaning can sometimes be given to words spoken thoughtlessly and the day was to come when Mary was to regret very deeply having used those words.

All this time Billie had been standing quietly waiting for the moment when they could leave the older people and consign the box to the iron safe upstairs.

But before they could get away the tea room began to empty itself. Billie's Cousin Helen appeared in the doorway, with Mrs. Butler, looking like Elinor grown middle-aged, the beautiful aquiline nose slightly more pronounced, the blue eyes a little faded, but the same erect carriage which made her look an inch or more taller than the other women.

Mme. Alta, the music teacher, was there with Miss Gray. She was a fierce looking, dark-haired woman, her two upper teeth protruding over her lower lip like the tusks of a walrus, giving her a cruel animal expression. Mrs. Rogers, Belle's mother, a small faded, intensely nervous little woman, joined the group, followed by Percival Algernon St. Clair's doting parent, "the Widow St. Clair," as she was known, a charming, plump, pretty woman, as good natured as she was comfortably self-indulgent.

"Why, Wilhelmina, my darling, what is that large package you are carrying?" demanded Miss Campbell anxiously. "Has your papa sent you a present?"

"Oh, no, just—just a package of things I was going to leave here. We are going motoring for a while. You don't mind, do you Cousin Helen?"

"No, my child, as long as you don't go too fast. But do put down that box. You will injure yourself carrying it so long. Why don't you put it in the motor? Why do you leave it here?"

"Oh, it isn't mine," said Billie.

Mrs. Price looked up at this.

"But I thought——" she commenced, when Mary pressed her hand.

"I mean I am keeping it for some one," went on Billie lamely.

"My dear Miss Campbell," put in Miss Gray—and Billie thanked her for the intervention—"it is a Blue Bird secret, you may depend upon it. You do not know school girls as well as I do."

"It ees a ver-ry eenter-resting looking pack-age," here remarked Mme. Alta. "It appears to be a ver-ry handsome box, as I can plainly see by one corner-r which protrudes. You perhaps use it for your club's segrets, eh?"

Billie turned the box guiltily around. She had not noticed that the torn end was in view.

Mme. Alta looked at her unnecessarily hard, Billie thought. She had never liked the strange woman and had preferred not to take piano lessons of her, after one glance at those hard, cruel eyes and the fierce, walrus teeth.

"I'm sure it contains much more beautiful and interesting things than stupid secrets," exclaimed good-natured, pretty Mrs. St. Clair, who disliked to see anybody around her uncomfortable.

and Billie looked very uncomfortable. "Now, dear," she continued, giving Billie a little squeeze, "do go and hide your box, if you like. It's not fair to quiz young girls about their secrets, any more than it is to quiz older people," and she pushed Billie gently into the hall. Mary quickly followed and the two girls ran upstairs, glad to get away from the group of inquisitive ladies, and infinitely relieved to consign the unlucky box into the small safe in the hall closet.

"What a joy to be rid of the thing," exclaimed Billie, as they shoved the box inside, turned the combination lock, and fled downstairs.

"I feel as if we need a good dose of fresh air, Mary, to revive us after that inquisition," she added, as they hurried past the company of tea drinkers, who still lingered chatting in the doorway, and joined the others in the motor car.

"Percival, my son," called Mrs. St. Clair, "don't lean out so far. You might fall and break your nose. Oh, oh, my precious boy, they'll kill him!" she shrieked, as Charlie and Merry seized him by the arms and pretended to pitch him overboard.

CHAPTER X.

RUMORS AT SCHOOL.

West Haven High School, Miss Gray, the Principal, had often said, had all the merits of a public and private school combined. It was more thorough than a private school and the teachers were more in touch with the pupils than is usual at a public school. Miss Gray herself was deeply interested in the welfare of her girls and studied carefully the ability and temperament of each one.

When, therefore, a strange and very terrible complaint was made to her one morning about one of her school girls, she was too shocked to reason intelligently about it, and ended by dismissing the complainants quietly from her private office until ~~she~~ sent for them again.

Exactly what the complaint was no one knew except those who had made it. It was kept a careful secret. But in school rumors arise in

the most subtle way. They are whispered about behind doors at recess; written on the margins of text books in class and hastily rubbed out; vaguely hinted at here and there until they spread from room to room and class to class and gradually the whole school is bursting with the news. And the poor victim may all this time be entirely unconscious that she is the very centre of a seething, boiling pot of gossip.

This is how the present rumor started in West Haven High School:

One afternoon when the last gong had sounded the sophomore class gathered in the locker room to put on their coats and hats. The lockers were only so in name. There had never been any keys to them, because there had never been any need to keep belongings under lock and key in West Haven High School, where most of the pupils had known each other all their lives.

On this particular afternoon, every incident of which our four friends will remember as long as they live, Nancy was prinking at the glass, as usual; Elinor and Billie, with their heads bent over an automobile map, were making plans for

a motor trip, and Mary Price was studying her Latin for the next day. It was that lingering, lazy time after school is over, which all school girls know.

Fannie Alta hurried into the room and flung open the door of her locker, next to that of Belle Rogers, who was at that moment engaged in looking at herself in her own private mirror, hung on the inside of her locker door.

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear!” exclaimed Fannie Alta, with a very excited and strange manner. “I have lost something. Something which my mamma gave me to keep for her. What shall I do? What shall I do?”

“Why, what was it, Fannie?” asked the other girls, gathering around her sympathetically. “Let us help you find it.”

“Oh, oh, it is terrible!” cried the young Spanish girl, wringing her hands and weeping in her handkerchief alternately. “What shall I do? What shall I do?”

“Was it money you lost?” asked Billie, in her usual rather abrupt manner.

“Yes, yes; how did you know?”

"I didn't know, I guessed," answered Billie.

"Did you leave it in your locker?" some one else asked.

"Yes, yes. I left it there at noon to-day. Twenty dollars my mamma gave to me to keep for her. Oh, is it not terrible? She will eat me with her anger."

Billie could hardly keep the corners of her mouth from curving with an irrepressible smile when she remembered those two front tusks of Mme. Alta's, which seemed to be uncovered, ready for work at any moment.

"Are you sure it is not there still?" asked Elinor quietly. "I happened to look up when you came into the room. You simply flung open your locker door and then began to cry. Why don't you look in your pockets before you decide that you have lost the money?"

Fannie flashed an angry glance at Elinor.

"How did you know that I had not looked before; that I have not looked twice, many times?"

"I didn't," answered Elinor. "Have you?"

Fannie did not reply and from that moment she and Elinor disliked each other intensely.

Then the girls began looking carefully about the room.

"I feel as if I had it hidden about me," said Nancy, giggling, as she helped in the search.

The others laughed, too, which somewhat relieved the situation. Nothing is more uncomfortable than for money to be lost mysteriously in a company of people.

"We do look as guilty as the forty thieves," ejaculated Rosomond McLane, a fat, funny girl, who was popular with the whole class.

No one was more active in the search than Belle Rogers. She shook Fannie's text books violently and scattered the papers about, to Fannie's intense annoyance. She felt in Fannie's pockets, examined the lining of her hat, and made herself so officious and numerous that Fannie herself exclaimed with much irritation:

"Please do not, Belle. You know it is not there."

Only Elinor sat quietly on the window sill watching the search, with just the faintest shadow of scornful incredulity on her handsome face.

"Elinor Butler, do you believe I have been telling a falsehood?" Fannie finally exclaimed in exasperation.

"What a little spitfire you are, Fannie," answered Elinor. "Just because I don't choose to grovel on the floor looking for your money. I can help you quite as much by thinking, and I am thinking very hard, I can assure you."

At last the search was abandoned. The pocket-book containing the money could not be found, and the young girls, swinging their book straps,—bags were too childish for High School girls,—strolled up the street in groups discussing the strange disappearance of Fannie's twenty dollars.

In the meantime, the Motor Maids, laughing and talking together, tossed their books into the red car and then climbed in themselves. Somehow, Fannie's loss did not seem very real. Billie had cranked up the machine and was about to back out when Fannie's voice called from the locker room:

"Wait! Stop!"

"Well, you see we haven't gone yet," answered Elinor severely.

"Elinor, you are so hard on Fannie Alta. I'm sorry for her," said Mary. "Mother wouldn't bite me if I lost twenty dollars, but I'd hate to lose it just the same."

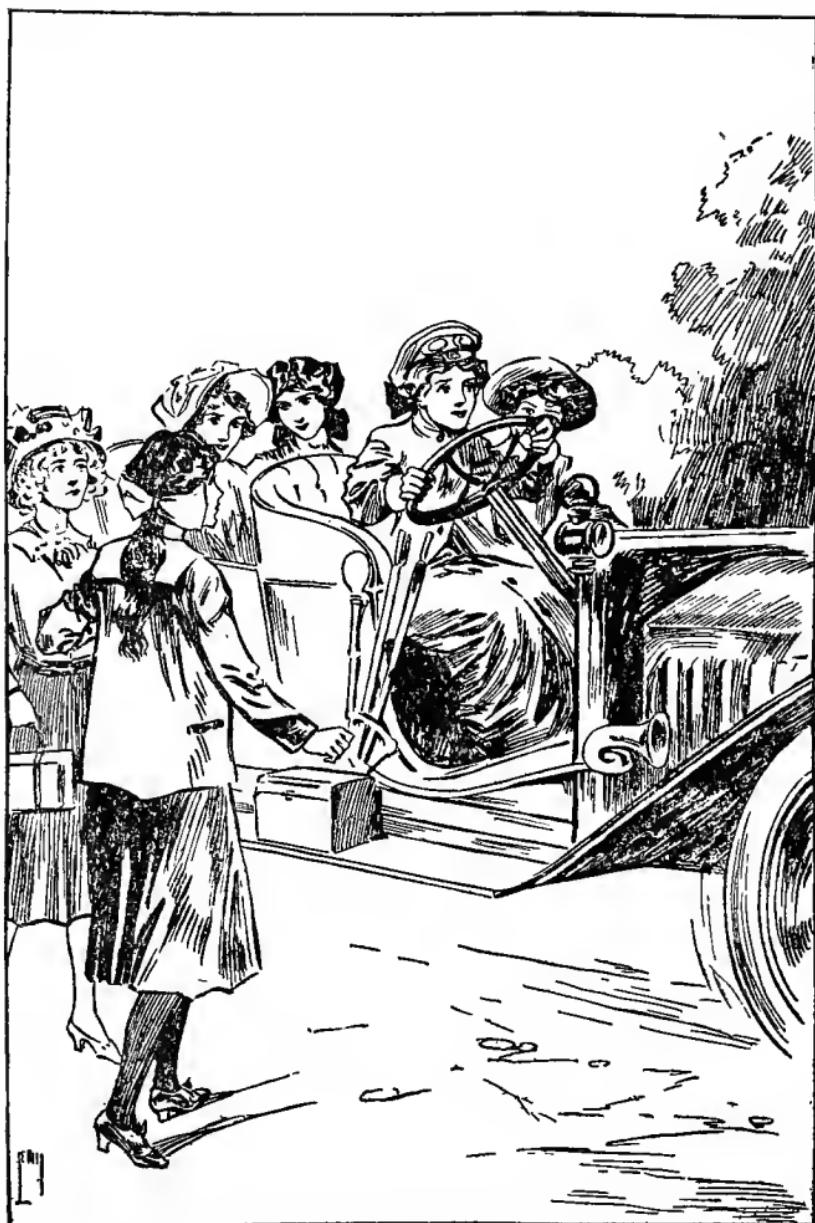
"I didn't mean to be hard on her," answered Elinor, "but my instincts tell me not to trust her."

"When did they tell you, Elinor?" laughed Billie.

Elinor's instincts were a great joke to her three devoted friends. But the appearance of Fannie running breathlessly, with Belle following at a dignified pace, interrupted Elinor's invariable reply to jests about her instincts: "You know they are never wrong."

"What is the matter now, Fannie?" asked Billie, who was standing in the front of her car, her arms folded, like a captain on the hurricane deck of his ship.

"Would you mind——" Fannie stammered. "I mean—I think I have a right to ask—I want you to look in your pockets. I believe——" she con-



"Get out of the road," cried Billie, backing recklessly out of the shed and whizzing out of the gate at full speed.

tinued, getting bolder every moment. "I am sure that one of you will find my pocketbook——"

Billie's frank, candid face flushed as scarlet as her motor car, while the color left Elinor's cheeks as white as death. Nancy gave a little frightened giggle, and Mary Price neither flushed nor turned white, but looked quietly on.

"Really, Fannie," spoke Elinor, "you are not in the lawless South American country you came from, whatever it is. You are among decent people, not thieves, and perhaps you had better remember that hereafter. Start on, Billie," she commanded, sitting as erect as a queen at her own coronation.

"But I insist!" screamed Fannie.

"She has a right," put in Belle.

"Get out of the road," cried Billie, backing recklessly out of the shed, turning with a wide, flourishing curve and whizzing out of the gate at full speed.

"Well, of all the insolence," cried Elinor. "What does she mean and how does she dare —" her voice choked with indignation.

"Don't you think it was Belle Rogers who put her up to it out of revenge?" suggested Mary.

"If it was, I can't see what she had to gain by it," said Billie. "Elinor sailed into them and we nearly sailed over them. It seems to me we had a good deal the best of it."

Billie dropped the girls at their homes, as she was in the habit of doing every afternoon after school, and whirled up Cliff Street to the old Campbell 'homestead. On the way she passed Belle Rogers, who also lived in that fashionable section, but she did not ask her to get in and ride up the hill. Billie had a frank, open nature, but with her whole soul she distrusted that pink and white doll-baby face and those innocent china blue eyes.

In the meantime Mary had taken off her rather threadbare little jacket and hung it in the closet. Her mother was resting on the couch. She looked pale and tired that day, and Mary walked softly so as not to disturb her. Slipping off her mittens, she thrust them into her coat pocket. Her fingers encountered something and she pulled out a flat, foreign-looking pocketbook. Mary's face

turned white and she leaned against the wall of the closet and closed her eyes.

"They must have put it in my pocket," she whispered. "What shall I do?"

"Mary, dearest," called her mother.

"Yes, mother," she answered, quietly slipping the purse into the pocket again. "I won't tell her now," she thought. "She is worried enough already." And when presently she kissed her mother, no one could have told that the young girl was more frightened than she had ever been in all her lifetime.

The next morning Mary hurried to school without waiting for Billie and her car. She had something to study, she said. But Fannie was there before her, waiting in the locker room. Mary tried to calm her beating heart as she looked steadily at the other girl. Then, with a sudden resolution, she marched straight up to Fannie, and thrust the pocketbook into her hand.

"You put this in my pocket," she said. "I don't know what you have against me, or what I ever did to you, but if you ever do it again, I shall go straight to Miss Gray."

Fannie took the pocketbook without a word, and after that a very different version of the story got out. Finally it reached Miss Gray's ears.

But the most serious thing of all was that things began disappearing every day out of the girls' lockers.

CHAPTER XI.

SEVEN LEAGUE ISLAND.

“Pile in any old way and make yourselves as comfy as you can,” said Billie, from the chauffeur’s seat, while seven boys and girls packed themselves into “The Comet” as tightly as sardines in a box.

“Ben, I look to you to take good care of my girls,” called Miss Helen Campbell, from the front door steps of her home. “And all of you promise me three things: Don’t go too fast; don’t stay too late, and don’t go too far.”

“We promise,” came eight voices in a chorus.

“Good-by, Cousin Helen, dearest,” called Billie, kissing her hand affectionately to the little lady who was fast coming to fill an aching void in Billie’s heart.

“Good-by, Miss Campbell,” called the others, while she smiled and bowed and waved her hand-

kerchief like a favorite actress before an enthusiastic audience.

What a difference the young people had made in her life, she thought, as the carload of boys and girls flashed down the street and the sound of their talk and laughter, growing fainter and fainter, floated back to her like a pleasant memory.

It was a real seaside October day. Nothing could have been bluer than the bay, unless it was the sky. A warm, dry land breeze swept over the moors about West Haven. Wild asters and golden rod colored the roadside, and the stillness of Indian summer pervaded the whole country.

"There was no need of the top to-day," observed Billie, looking up at the cloudless sky. "I am glad we decided not to put it on. We might as well have left the rugs and wraps behind, too. They take up room and won't be used, I am certain."

"I hope not," answered Ben. "I see only one cloud on the horizon and that's no larger than a man's hand; but clouds do grow."

"Don't borrow trouble, Rain-in-the-Face," ex-

claimed Percy. "The last time you looked into the future we had a fire."

"All right, dummy," answered his friend. "I am not predicting anything. I only mentioned the possibilities of a very small cloud. And the night of the Shell Island fire I said what certainly proved to be perfectly true—that the hotel was a regular fire trap."

"Are you really a good weather prophet, Ben?" asked Billie anxiously. She did not like to have her parties turn out disastrously.

"He—he's the poorest ever," cried Merry.

"Don't go on what he says, Billie," put in Percy. "The last camping trip we went on, he predicted fair weather and it rained for a week."

"Well, just to prove that I know what I'm talking about," cried Ben, "I predict that it rains before night."

This unpopular prophecy was greeted by hoots of derision from the others.

"What makes you think so, Ben?" asked Elinor. "It's as clear as a bell now."

"Certain signs," he answered.

"Now, Ben Austen," ejaculated Nancy. "Don't

go spoil our day before it's begun. You know just as well as I do that it's Indian summer, and it never rains in Indian summer."

"Never, Miss Nancy-Bell?" repeated Ben, smiling. He minded as little being teased by his friends as a big, good-natured dog minds the antics of a lot of puppies.

"All right, Big Injun Ben," said Merry, "let it rain before night. We've got a good many hours to enjoy ourselves in and get home, too, before dark. We'll be at the ferry-boat landing in an hour, and if we're lucky enough to catch the boat, we'll reach Seven League Island by eleven o'clock. That will give us plenty of time to eat everything in sight, see Smugglers' Cave, and all the other sights, and get home by seven o'clock."

"Of course, we can," replied Ben. "I was only teasing Percival Algernon St. Clair, because he hates the rain worse than poison. I never saw a finer day in my life."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Billie, in tones of relief. She really had great faith in Ben's judgment about most things.

Seven League Island, a rocky strip of land some

twenty-one miles long, was one of the most romantic places in the vicinity of West Haven. It was three miles from the mainland and, during the season when the summer resorts and camps which clustered on its shores were open, several ferry-boats carried passengers back and forth from the mainland to the island. In winter the place was almost deserted. The land was too poor for farming and few people cared to remain on that lonely, mournful island, where, in stormy weather, the waves thundered through the caves in the cliffs, and the wind in the pine trees made a mournful sound like the wail of a lost soul.

To-day, however, it was as serene and smiling as the Islands of the Blest. The southwest wind stirred the pine needles gently, making a pleasant quiet song. The tiny waves, as they lapped the sides of the ferry, gave out a "cloop, cloop" sound that still water makes against the bow of a canoe.

"What time does the last ferry go back, Captain?" asked Ben, of the old ferryman, whose face was as weather beaten and seamed as the hide of a hippopotamus.

"Six, in good weather."

"What time in bad?"

"Depends on the weather," answered the old man briefly.

"How many other ferry stations are there?" asked Charlie.

"Three."

"Good," exclaimed happy-go-lucky Americus Brown. "We'll take the one that's nearest when the time comes to go back and ride before the wind, and beat the rain and put old Ben out of business as a weather prophet."

The ferryman said nothing, but his small eyes twinkled with amusement.

They were the only passengers on the boat that trip, and as the motor whirled up the hard-beaten road from the ferry landing, they noticed that the bungalows and summer cottages along the shore were closed for the season.

"It's because it's so hard to get food," Percy explained. He had once visited some friends at Flag Point, the first settlement, and was to be their guide this morning to the great cave, which

had been used, it was said, in the days when smugglers were common in the land.

The others were familiar only with the shore, where they had come on bathing and fishing excursions, and the boys and girls were eager to explore the rocky caverns, the fort, the little inlets, where pirates were supposed to have anchored their ships, and above all the smugglers' cave, which Percy told them was a great vaulted chamber in the rocks, with an entrance no broader than a narrow door.

"Take the road going to the right," called Percy, as Billie paused at the top of the cliff for directions. "It's the best one for motoring and it goes past the old rifle-pit where we can eat lunch. We can leave the car there and climb down to the caves afterwards."

"The Comet" turned obediently to the right and shot down the interminable expanse of empty white road, like a shooting star on the milky way.

Even Mary, who had been pale and silent all morning, regained her spirits on that glorious ride, when Merry, with head thrown back, began to sing:

"The sailor's wife the sailor's star shall be,
Yo-ho, yo-ho-ho, yo-ho, yo-ho-ho!"

and she joined in the chorus with the others, her clear, sweet voice piping out like the notes of a field lark in a chorus of birds.

At last Billie pulled up at the side of the road under a cliff, on top of which was an old grass-grown fort used during the Indian wars.

"This must be it," she said. "It's peaceful enough looking now to make a good picnicing ground, but I don't suppose it was much of a picnic for the people who built it to shoot Indians from."

"Nor much of a picnic for the Indians, either," said Ben, helping Billie out while Charlie Clay assisted the other girls to the ground and Percy and Merry unstrapped the luncheon hamper.

"Let's eat up high," suggested Billie. "That is, if you can carry the basket up that steep incline."

"The pack mules are here for that work," said Ben, pointing to Merry and Percy. "Charlie, you bring the rugs for the ladies to sit on and I'll help the ladies."

“Will you listen to Nervy Nat,” cried Percy, as he obediently shouldered his end of the lunch-eon hamper and followed Merry up the hill.

How they laughed and scrambled and shoved as they clambered up the pebbly path. Once Mary, with a shrill cry, slipped and stumbled back on Nancy who fell against Charlie, who, in his turn, tumbled against Ben, and that pillar of strength, grasping a branch of a pine tree with each hand, supported the whole human weight without a tremor.

It was like picnicing in the tops of the trees, when they finally spread the cloth in the grass-grown enclosure of the fort, and beyond them stretched the entire expanse of the ocean glimmering blue in the sunshine, with an occasional ship outlined on the horizon.

“I hope the ginger ale is still cold,” cried Merry.

“And the mayonnaise hasn’t melted,” said Nancy.

“What, nothing to eat but victuals and drink?” exclaimed Percy.

When they had waded through the piles of

sandwiches and pyramids of cake, and drained the last drop of ginger ale, silent Charlie, who had an enormous appetite, remarked:

"How hungry this piney-salty combination does make a fellow!"

"Why, Charlie," said Billie, "don't say you are still hungry. You remind me of the elephant in Merry's song:

"The elephant ate all night,
The elephant ate all day,
And feed as they would, as much as they could,
The cry was still more hay.' "

Charlie pulled out his mouth organ and began to play such a rollicking dance tune that the boys and girls, almost before they knew it, were two-stepping over the grass as madly as a lot of wild young colts. Then Charlie, seizing Mary about the waist and still playing vigorously on his "harp," as it was called in that section, joined the dancers himself.

If they had not all of them been so absorbed in executing the Dutch twirl, or racing over the ground like Cossack dancers on the Russian Steppes, they would have been somewhat dis-

turbed to have seen a man peering down at them from the top of a mound. He had crawled up the steep incline and was lying flat on his stomach in the tall grass. His face is familiar enough to us by now, for he had only one eye, but that one, like the eye of the three mythological witches, gleamed brilliantly and wickedly and nothing escaped its range. He smiled as if he rather enjoyed watching the dancers, and especially his one wicked eye followed the movements of Ben and Charlie and Billie Campbell. Presently when the whirling couples had tumbled breathlessly on the grass, fanning themselves with their hats and Ben had called out: "We'd better be getting along now," the man slipped away as silently as a snake and disappeared somewhere below.

"To the caves," cried Percy, as they gathered up the rugs and cushions and hastened down the cliff to the motor.

"I suppose it's safe to leave 'The Comet' here without any one to look after him," Billie had observed, and the others had agreed that it was.

"As safe as on any other desert island," Ben had answered.

It seemed impossible that anything could happen in that lonely, quiet place, which was like a deserted paradise to the girls and boys that beautiful afternoon. There was nothing about the locality or the weather to arouse uncomfortable suspicions. The patch of sky, which was revealed to them just overhead between the tall, straight pine trees, was like a beautiful deep blue canopy. Even the watchful Ben could not have told that the cloud, so short a time ago no larger than a man's hand, now stretched itself across the horizon in a long, thick line of black.

"The caves are the most fun of all," said Percy, leading the way to the cliffs overlooking the ocean. "There are dozens of them, some little and some very large. The lower ones fill up at high tide, but the upper ones are safe enough."

The cliff was honeycombed with small rocky chambers, and as they clambered, Indian file, along the narrow path which nature had so thoughtfully cut in the rocks they heard the boom of the incoming tide thundering through the caves on the beach.

"I suppose people could live in these little cav-

erns," Percy continued, "if it wasn't so all-fired lonely and inconvenient; but wait until you see Smugglers' Cave. It has as many natural conveniences as a real house built by human beings."

"Here it is," he cried at last, to the others who had run all the way down a steep embankment to see this romantic place.

Certainly it might well have been a favorite spot for smugglers and robbers on the high seas. Too high for the tide to reach and still well hidden from above by a thick growth of scrubby pine and oak trees, the cave was as secret and safe a place as could be imagined. Rock-hewn steps led up from the smooth pebbly beach below and the curve of the coast made a charming little haven for ships and a natural landing place for small boats. The eight friends stood in a row on the beach.

"This is called 'Pirates' Cove,' you know," went on Percy. "They say the pirates used to anchor their ships in this little haven and come ashore and have pirate tea parties on the beach."

"Here comes a sea rover now," called Merry,

scanning the entrance to the harbor where a ship could be seen outlined against the blue.

"Oh, she isn't coming this way, Old Tar," answered Percy. "It's too late in the season, for yachts and ships rarely come in here unless there is a storm. There's nothing to come for and it takes them out of their course."

"She's headed this way," continued Merry, not taking any notice of Percy's interruption, while he scanned the ship with his far-seeing sailor's eyes. "She's a brigantine, and she's making for this cove."

"Oh, well, what of it?" put in Billie. "Perhaps she is coming here for the rest cure. But she doesn't interest me half as much as Smugglers' Cave. Let's not waste any more time here," and she ran up the steps, followed by the others.

The entrance to the cave had been as cleverly concealed as if nature had conspired with the outlaws to provide them with a safe hiding place for their contraband goods. The steps appeared to lead to nothing more than a blank wall, but, following Percy around the edge of an enormous

rock which, in ages past must have slipped its fastenings above, they presently came to a narrow opening between the rock and the side of the cave, just large enough for a man to go through.

“The smugglers must have had to do up their bales of silk pretty flat to get them through here,” said Ben, measuring the opening with his handkerchief, as he stooped to keep from bumping his head on the top.

“How beautiful! How wonderful!” cried the four girls, when their eyes had become used to the change from the brilliant sunlight outside to the semi-twilight of the great vaulted chamber where they now found themselves.

“Now, I’ll show you what a jim-dandy architect nature is,” said Percy. “Here’s the bathroom. No hot water, of course, but a perfectly good tub and cold water always on tap.”

He pointed out a natural basin, probably worn in the rocks by the constant dripping of water from a spring that trickled down the wall of the cave.

“Here’s the bedroom, that nice, comfortable shelf over there. Here’s your easy chair,” he

continued, showing them a curious formation of rocks really resembling a big armchair with a high back.

"It's a rocky chair and not a rocking chair," observed Charlie, taking a seat and rising quite suddenly. "Nature is as mischievous as a little boy if she is a good architect. Look at this," and he pointed to a very sharp, almost needle-like, piece of stone in one corner of the seat.

The others laughed gayly as they hurried after Percy and a hundred reverberating echoes startled them into silence.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, I have saved the most interesting sight for the last. You are about to see the store-room of the smugglers." He led the way down two steps into another chamber.

"By Jove!" he cried suddenly and stopped short.

"What is it?" exclaimed the others, peering over his shoulder into the darkness.

"Don't you see?" he said, in a low voice. "They are still using it for a store-room."

They blinked their eyes with amazement, when

presently there loomed up in the shadows a pile of long, flat packing boxes.

Ben lit a candle, which he had thoughtfully brought along in his coat pocket, and they examined the boxes, which crowded one entire end of the smugglers' store-room.

"Will you look at this?" he called. "Elinor, you are in this."

Ben held the candle high and pointed to a sign on the nearest box, which read: "Automobile Supplies—Butler Brothers—West Haven—"

"Why," cried Elinor, "you surely don't suppose Uncle Tom and Uncle Richard could be storing their goods here, do you?"

No one answered her for a moment. Their thoughts were busy searching for an explanation to this strange discovery.

"Elinor," said Mary presently, "don't you remember what those men who borrowed Billie's automobile said about killing every Butler in the county who interfered?"

"Yes," said Elinor, in a frightened voice, "but what could these boxes have to do with it?"

"They may have a great deal," said Ben.

"Those men are probably smuggling your uncles' auto supplies out of the country. The boxes are smuggled up to this cave by degrees, I suppose, and then loaded on some ship when they have got enough to make it worth while. And, if it's the same man we had dealings with that night, he is a pretty desperate kind of an individual."

"I don't want any more fights," exclaimed Billie. "Both of those men carried pistols and knives; I suppose all first-class smugglers do, but I don't propose that my party is going to be ruined by any bloodshed. It is getting late, and we had better be going."

They quite agreed with Billie, although the boys would have liked to linger in the Smugglers' Cave for a while.

The outer air seemed very warm and oppressive after the cold damp atmosphere of the cave. They blinked their eyes and shivered as they hurried along the path which led to the road and in the change from dark to light they did not at first notice that the sun was hidden by a great cloud, as black as ink, which stretched from hori-

zon to horizon. A hot, heavy wind stirred the pine needles and that sense of impending trouble which always comes before a great storm sobered the spirits of the boys and girls.

Nobody spoke of the cloud. It seemed to be a question of honor with them not to mention it, but they hurried on silently, and in a few minutes reached the automobile.

With a sigh of relief, the four girls were about to jump in, while Ben cranked up, when suddenly Nancy gave a little, pent-up scream.

“Look!” she cried, pointing to a piece of paper stuck on the cushion of the back seat.

This message was printed with a lead pencil on the paper:

“He laughs best who laughs last.”

“It was that man,” said Billie, examining the tires ruefully, each one of which had been slashed with a sharp knife.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORM.

“Billie, can you put on new tires?” demanded Ben, somewhat anxiously, making a mental determination to learn all about the mechanism of motor cars before he went on another motor trip.

The others stood back rather helplessly. Merry, especially, felt stupid and uncomfortable in having to stand aside and let a girl do all the work.

“Of course, I can,” replied Billie, trying to speak cheerfully, as a low cannonading of thunder rumbled in the distance. “I have done it dozens of times, only it will take time, of course. The tools are under the seat. Hustle up, everybody. Charlie, you get the new tires. Ben, you help me.”

In a few moments Ben and Billie were kneeling on the ground adjusting the tire of the first wheel, while Charlie and Merry were engaged in examining the extra tires, which the motor

carried in case of accident, and Percy made himself as useful as possible, unpacking all the wraps, Billie's oilskin coat and cap and the rubber blankets.

"Billie," announced Charlie, "there are only three good tires here. The fourth has a puncture. It's only a small one, but——"

"I know," interrupted Billie, looking extremely worried. "It was an imperfect one. I may be able to patch it."

Then Charlie and Merry held a whispered conference and disappeared around the bluff.

"What's up?" asked Ben, looking over his shoulder at their retreating figures.

But nobody could answer the question. The girls were getting into their ulsters and Percy was arranging the rubber blankets and rugs in the car.

"What a confoundedly low, mean trick of that fellow to do this," he kept saying to himself, keeping one eye on the black clouds piling up and the other on Billie and Ben. He figured that it would take an hour and a half at least to get all four tires on and, he thought, Billie would be a

pretty smart girl to do it that quickly. It was half-past three o'clock.

"What about that ferry," he said to himself.

At last they were pumping up the third tire. It seemed an age to those who were idly looking on. The girls sat in a row on the side of the road, their hands folded patiently in their laps, while Percy paced up and down, watching the top of the bluff uneasily.

"Where are Charlie and Merry?" he said at last, unable to conceal his anxiety any longer.

"Idiots," exclaimed Nancy. "Haven't we enough to worry us?"

While she spoke there came a blinding flash of lightning and a clap of thunder seemed to split the heavens in two.

Nancy hid her face on Elinor's shoulder. Billie and Ben kept on working steadily. They had reached the fourth tire now and Billie had managed to patch the punctured place just as the first great drops of rain began to fall.

"Where are those boys?" Ben called over his shoulder, not stopping to look up.

“I’ll call them,” said Percy, and running to the top of the cliff he began to halloo and whistle.

It had grown suddenly so dark that they thought the sun must have set an hour earlier than usual. A cold wind sprang up and whizzed through the pines with a sound that made them shiver.

“Hurrah, it’s done!” cried Billie triumphantly, just as a driving wall of rain struck her in the face. “Get in, girls, quick,” she shouted, as she slipped on her oil skins. “Boys, where are you? Crank up, Ben.”

Suddenly, in the midst of the din and racket of the storm, came a wild halloo. Charlie and Merry appeared, running down the road toward the motor car, and six men were following them, shouting and gesticulating.

“Get in as fast as you can,” commanded Ben, and the girls will never forget the terror of that moment as they tumbled into the car.

The booming of the sea in the caves, the cannonading of the thunder, the sharp whistle of the wind in the tops of the trees, and the shouts of the men! But in the midst of it all came the

kindly, cheering whir of the motor engine. Billie could have kissed the faithful "Comet" on his broad, good-natured forehead for his loyalty at this moment, when they most needed him. As Charlie and Merry leaped onto the step, she threw in the clutch, and they were off just as the first man reached the car, brandishing a long knife and yelling hoarsely.

The boys climbed over into the back, too tired to speak. Merry had a black eye and Charlie had a bloody nose.

"Billie, the next ferry is Payne's," called Percy. "It's about a mile from here. Go straight ahead."

And Billie, sticking to her wheel like a good pilot, ducked her head and guided the flying motor along the slippery road.

They seemed hardly to have taken breath before they reached Payne's landing and found it empty and deserted of every human being who had ever ventured into that lonely place.

"We'll have to try for the next ferry landing then," said Percy, dejectedly. "It's back toward Flag Point."

Without a word, Billie turned the car, and put-

ting on all speed they whizzed through the rain. At that moment she had only one prayer in her heart: to pilot her friends safely through the storm and get them to the ferry landing. There was no sign of any of their pursuers as they passed the fort. When at last they reached the second summer encampment they breathed a sigh of relief. The ferry boat was docked at the landing and a man stood under the shed, his hands in his pockets.

Billie drew up at the entrance.

“Captain, will you take us on?” called Ben. He always called boatmen and conductors captain. He found it pleased them, but this man did not reply and still stood with his back turned looking out on the now angry strip of water between Seven League Island and the mainland.

Ben shouted and they all shouted together, but the man was as unmoved as a wooden statue.

“He’s deaf,” said Billie. “Get out and shake him.”

Ben jumped out and shook the man’s shoulder, who, with a strange guttural sound, turned slowly around.

"And dumb," exclaimed Ben, indicating with violent motions first the automobile and then the ferry-boat.

The deaf mute shook his head and pointed in the direction of Flag Point. They offered him money, tried persuasion, threats, prayers, which he could not hear, and finally ended by dashing off toward the last ferry.

"It's our only chance," said Ben, "but we'll get over in that if we have to use force."

Meantime, the island, lashed by the storm, looked bleak and cold, and they wondered they could ever have admired it at all. Crouched under the rubber covers, they shivered with chill, while Billie, on the front seat, Ben and Percy beside her always on the lookout, with clinched teeth and hands gripped to the wheel, guided them through the hurricane. It seemed to her they must be riding on the very wings of the wind, and the speedometer announced fifty miles an hour.

As they dashed through the straggling little street of that forlorn village of Flag Point, the few indifferent natives who braved the winters

on the island looked out of their windows in wonder. It seemed to them that a streak of red lightning had flashed through the storm.

“Cheer up, all of you, our troubles are over,” called Ben. “The ferry-boat’s at the landing.”

The old boat seemed like a haven of rest when they pulled into the shelter of its alley for wagons and motor cars.

“Captain, why didn’t you tell us that this was the only ferry running?” demanded Ben of the wrinkled old man.

“Because I don’t never answer questions that ain’t first been put to me,” replied the laconic boatman.

“Don’t scold him,” said Billie, wiping streams of water from her face. “Any one who is obliged to live in a God-forsaken, wretched place like Seven League Island couldn’t be supposed to have any human interest. I imagine they all get to be like their own flinty rocks, hard, sharp, and ugly.”

“Well, bloody nose and blacky eye,” put in Percy, “it’s about time for you to give an account of yourselves.”

"Yes," said the others, who had been so stunned by the fast ride through the storm and the race for the ferry that they had almost forgotten what had happened.

"When we found," began Merry, "that one of the tires had a puncture, Charlie and I thought we might as well make that low, scoundrelly thief who slashed the tires pay back with one of those he had stolen from Mr. Butler. So we chased over to Smugglers' Cave, but it took longer than we had expected, because we had taken the wrong path and had to crawl around a precipice and jump over crags like two mountain goats."

"Don't forget to tell that your pirate brigantine was anchored out in the harbor," put in Charlie. "We supposed it was lying up to get out of the storm, but we had another think coming——"

"Yes, I guess you will all listen to me, next time," went on Merry. "That was the most piratical-looking band of fellows with their knives and their red handkerchiefs as I ever saw in a story book. Well, we did get to the cave at last and found it as empty as it was before. Charlie

had a chisel in his pocket. You know, he is the human tool box, and with that and a piece of stone we managed to loosen some of the boards. But there wasn't a tire or anything else connected with an automobile inside the box. You'll never guess what the boxes were filled with. Something about as foreign to a motor car, except in sound, when a tire bursts, as a caterpillar."

"You don't mean guns?" demanded Ben.

"We certainly do. Rifles by the dozens packed in all the boxes we had time to open."

"We were chumps," interrupted Charlie. "If we had stopped sooner, I never would have had this bloody nose."

"Well, haven't I got a black eye?" demanded his friend.

"What happened? What happened?" cried Percy impatiently.

"While we were tinkering with the boxes, we heard the sharpest, loudest whistle I ever heard in my life, and we both lit out and ran. I was in front and just as I got to the mouth of the cave, a one-eyed, one-armed ruffian leapt out at me. His one arm was as strong as most men's two,

but he couldn't beat Charlie and me together, although he gave me this little souvenir and he planted his fist on Charlie's nose. While we were fighting, a boat from the ship with six sailors in it landed below. They came tearing up the steps like a lot of bloodhounds, and Charlie and I had a run for our lives. Didn't we, midget?"

Charlie acknowledged the fact gravely. There was no denying that the two boys had been in a very dangerous situation.

"We were ready just in the nick of time, too," said Billie. "If Ben hadn't cranked up, we'd have had those men on us in another minute."

It was good to be on land again, even though it wasn't dry land, and the ride home, safe and swift, was blissful after the dangers and excitement of that thrilling picnic.

It seemed that Seven League Island must have been the very centre of the hurricane and that West Haven had only been visited with a heavy shower. Miss Campbell, therefore, was spared any great anxiety.

But, oh, the joy of drawing up to the cheerful blaze of the wood fire, while eight youthful

adventurers related a somewhat softened version of the events of the day! Then the supper that followed, in Miss Campbell's big, old-fashioned dining room, with fried chicken and hot biscuits and omelette as light as a feather, and strawberry jam that took the prize at the county fair!

But best of all was what Merry did at the last, when, notwithstanding his stiff joints and bandaged eye, he rose from his seat and cried:

“Hip, hip, hurrah! Three cheers for Billie, the pluckiest chauffeur that ever ran a motor car.”

And all the rest joined in, even Miss Campbell, who clapped her hands and cried:

“Three cheers for my dear, dear Billie.”

Then Billie cried:

“Three cheers for Ben because he never said ‘I told you so,’ about the rain.”

That very night, before he went to his own home, Ben called at Mr. Richard Butler's house and told him the story of the bogus automobile supplies marked with the name of Butler Brothers.

There was a great telegraphing and telephon-

178. THE MOTOR MAIDS' SCHOOL DAYS

ing by long distance. The Butler Brothers were very excited and angry, just as their niece had predicted they would be. Detectives were engaged and other ships warned to keep a sharp lookout, but nothing was heard of the pirate brigantine.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS.

Never since she had been Principal of West Haven High School had Miss Gray been so upset as she was now. For the first time a scandal was connected with her beloved institution. Every day there was a new complaint.

“Miss Gray, I only left my ring on the wash-stand a minute, while I was washing my hands, and when I looked for it, it was gone,” said one girl.

“But who was in the washroom, Julia?” asked the Principal wearily. She was disgusted and angry with this troublesome situation.

“Oh, all the girls, Miss Gray, but nobody saw any one take it.”

Small purses containing lunch money were emptied of their contents and put back into jacket pockets. Some of the teachers lost money and Miss Gray herself was robbed of ten dollars, the

wages of the old janitor, which she had placed under a paper weight on the desk, in her own private office.

The whole school had gone distracted, but the pilferer was too clever to be caught.

Twice Miss Gray had summoned Mary Price to her office, but, after looking gravely into the young girl's serious eyes, she kissed her and sent her off on some improvised errand.

"I shall wait a few days," the Principal said. "After all, there may be some mistake."

And it was then that she determined to try an experiment.

One bleak autumn afternoon a thick, wet mist rolled in from the ocean and enveloped the town of West Haven so densely that it seemed like a city floating on a bank of cloud. Only the dim outline of objects twenty yards away could be seen and the muffled call of the fog horn at the lighthouse on the Black Reefs sounded its dismal warning through the mist.

Billie and Mary were hurrying arm in arm down the street in earnest conversation. Not-

withstanding it was after school hours, they were going toward the High School.

“Do you think we can get it, Mary?” Billie was saying.

“Oh, yes, the janitor always leaves the door to the basement corridor open until evening for Miss Gray and the teachers who sometimes stay late.”

“It was stupid of me to have left that horrid old algebra, but you know I always forget the things I don’t like. If Miss Finch hadn’t called me down so thoroughly this morning about my average in mathematics, I would just let the lesson for to-morrow go, or if Miss Finch were only Miss Allbright, or Miss anybody else but just a stern, animated mathematical cube.”

“She’s all right if you know your lessons,” said Mary, smiling. “It’s only the ones who don’t study hard enough to suit her who call her a human arithmetic.”

The door to the corridor was open, as Mary had predicted, and the girls entered, their footsteps resounding with a hollow echo through the empty place.

“I feel like one who treads alone some ban-

quiet hall deserted,'" quoted Billie. "Could anything be more ghostly than a deserted school?"

"It's not deserted," said Nancy. "I heard voices somewhere, I am certain of it, just as you opened the door."

They paused and listened for a moment, but the place was as still as a tomb. A dim gas-light burned in the long corridor, on each side of which were the arched entrances to the locker rooms of the various classes, wash rooms and Miss Gray's own private office.

"It reminds me of the catacombs in this light," whispered Billie. "I'm almost afraid of the sound of my own voice."

The girls slipped silently down the passage to the stairway leading to the class rooms. At her desk in the sophomore study room on the third floor Billie found her algebra. As she gathered together some of her scattered papers in the not over tidy interior of the little one-seated desk form, and searched for a certain favorite stubby pencil which she claimed brought her good luck with her problems, Mary at her own desk gave a cry of dismay and sat down limply.

“What was it, a mouse?” asked Billie, her voice sounding quite loud in the empty room.

“Oh, Billie, Billie, no, it was not a mouse. It was fifty dollars,” cried Mary. “I found it just now in my desk.”

“Fifty dollars?” echoed Billie, slipping her algebra into her pocket and hurrying over to her friend’s desk. “Are you playing a trick on me, Mary?”

“Listen, Billie,” said Mary. “I’m going to tell you something. I believe I am the victim of some kind of conspiracy. You know of course about all of the things that have been stolen from school lately?”

“Yes, but I haven’t had any losses myself; so I haven’t talked about it much to the others.”

“Of course you had no idea that I was supposed to be the thief,” Mary went on, with a sort of dry sob in her voice that was more heart-breaking to Billie than real weeping would have been.

Mary told her the story of Fannie Alta and the twenty dollars.

“I didn’t tell it before,” she continued, “because

I was so ashamed somehow, I couldn't bear for any one to know it."

Billie's heart swelled with indignation.

"The little wretch," she exclaimed, "you should have gone straight to Miss Gray about it, Mary."

"I know it, and I am sorry now I didn't, but I thought she wouldn't dare do it again, and she hasn't, but things are disappearing all the time, and I believe she has told it around school that I took the twenty dollars and all the other things. Nobody has said anything, of course, but I can't help feeling that they are all whispering about me whenever my back is turned."

"You poor, blessed child," exclaimed her friend. "And all this time you have been keeping it secret and suffering in silence."

Mary nodded her head.

"And the worst of it is, Miss Gray suspects me too. But she is not going to say anything until she is sure. I thought of talking to her about it, but it would look as if I had a guilty conscience to complain before I am accused."

"How dare any one suspect you of stealing," cried Billie, putting her arms around her friend

and kissing her warmly. "Would Miss Gray or any one else be so stupid as to take the word of Fannie Alta before yours?"

"But nobody has said anything that I know of," groaned poor Mary. "It's all in the air. That is why I don't know what to do. Suppose after all I was mistaken and they didn't suspect me. Suppose I took this money to Miss Gray and suppose she would think that I had taken all the other things and was just returning this because I had lost my nerve and suppose—suppose——"

"But, Mary," remonstrated Billie, "why suppose anything at all so awful? Why not suppose that Miss Gray will listen to you and believe every word you say. You are perfectly innocent and nothing on earth can make you guilty. Of course Fannie Alta must have left the money in your desk, though where she got so much is a mystery to me."

"But I tell you I am frightened, Billie. Such wretched things do happen and innocent people often suffer for guilty ones."

"Nonsense, Mary, you must not lose your

nerve in this way. Take the money and go straight to Miss Gray with it now. I will go with you."

The two girls gathered their things together silently. Mary put the roll of money in her jacket pocket and they made for the door. It was almost dark now and the rows of empty desks down the big room were like kneeling phantoms in the half light.

"Did you hear anything?" whispered Mary as they reached the door.

"I heard a step," answered Billie in a low voice. "It was probably the janitor."

With a mutual impulse they clasped hands and a wave of fear swept over them when they found that the door would not open.

"It must have stuck," whispered Mary. "Try it again."

But the door was locked fast.

"There is only one way for you to get back the key to the door, young ladies," said a voice so near to them that they both jumped back as if they had been struck in the face.

The person who had spoken had been standing

flat against the wall at the side of the door. He emerged from the shadows, as quietly as a shadow itself, and in the twilight his long, lank figure seemed almost to be floating in space. The small black mask which covered his face and his whole appearance reminded Billie of a gruesome picture she had once seen called "The Black Masque."

"You have a small sum of money there," he went on, "which you evidently do not wish to keep and which I would be pleased to have and can use at once. By a strange coincidence, I happened to overhear your conversation, you see, and as the money appears to belong to nobody and is exactly the sum I require I must have it."

Mary tried to speak, but her lips refused to form the words, and she had no voice left. There was a sound in Billie's ears like the pounding of surf on the beach and she felt quite dizzy.

"This is fright," she found herself saying, as a wave of homesickness for her father swept over her.

"Oh, papa, papa," she whispered.

The man had seized Mary's two hands in one

of his with a grip of steel, while with the other he felt in her jacket pocket, took the roll of money, pushed Billie roughly from the door, and with a laugh pulled back the bolt; there had been no key after all. The next instant he had slipped downstairs as softly as a cat and was gone.

The girls followed after him like two sleepwalkers.

"We've been robbed, Billie," moaned Mary, giving her dry sob. "The fifty dollars is gone. What shall we do now?"

Billie did not reply. She wanted to get out of that dark stuffy school building, and breathe in some fresh air before she dared trust her voice. It was good to feel the wet fog again in their faces as they hurried up the street.

"Why not still tell Miss Gray, Mary?" asked Billie at last, but already there was a feeling of doubt in her heart. It was certainly a very unlikely sounding story, a robber in the school room.

Suddenly a figure loomed up in the mist. It was Miss Gray herself.

"You are out late, girls," she said as she hurried past, and for some reason they both had an

uncomfortable feeling of having done something wrong.

Miss Gray hasted into the school building just as the janitor appeared to lock up.

“Jennings,” she said, “switch on the light in the sophomore study room. I shall only be there a moment.”

The janitor shuffled after her and turned on the light while Miss Gray opened Mary’s desk. She sighed deeply and shook her head.

“She must have got here before me,” she thought. “It was cruel to tempt the child at such a time as this when her mother is in great need of money. I felt so sure she would bring it straight to me and that was the only test I required. Oh, dear, what a crooked world this is. I am out fifty dollars. But how will the poor child ever explain all this money to her mother? She must have saved a good deal out of her pilfering——”

Miss Gray’s disconnected train of thought did not bring her any comfort, as she slowly descended the three flights of steps into the basement and plunged into the mist again.

"At least I shall wait a day or two," she continued. "The child may think better of it. She might have stopped me this evening, though. At all events I deserve to lose the money. It was a silly, stupid impulse, but I was so sure—so very sure——"

The mist had grown so thick now that the Principal walked very slowly, keeping close to the fence in order to guide herself to the corner where she must turn to go to her own home. A voice reached her through the fog. Someone was coming up from behind.

"I have procured fifty, Señor, a curious lucky stroke, and from a schoolroom, too—would you have believed——" the voice broke off in a laugh.

"Be careful——" said another voice, and two figures passed Miss Gray in the fog and were swallowed up again immediately.

"Is it possible," she exclaimed, "robbers in West Haven High School? What does it mean? And I have been blaming that innocent child. What an imbecile I have been!"

Her last resolution before sleep came to her that night was to notify the town police in the

morning and hire a detective to stay about the High School day and night.

Imagine the surprise of the bewildered Principal, when, next morning bright and early, Mary Price, after a timid knock on the office door, came hesitatingly into the room.

“Miss Gray,” she said, “I found this money yesterday afternoon in my desk. I don’t know how it came there nor whose it is. But it would be better for you to take charge of it until the owner asks for it.”

Mary spoke quickly, as if she had learned the little speech carefully by heart. There was a strange expression on Miss Gray’s face as she took ten crisp new five-dollar bills from the young girl’s outstretched hand.

“This is not even the same money,” she thought, forgetting to answer Mary in her amazement. “Am I losing my senses or is the child a deep dyed villain?”

Mary flushed scarlet under the Principal’s steady gaze, but she did not lower her eyes, and there was not a sign of guilt in the expression of the sad little face.

"Very well, dear," Miss Gray said at last.

Mary, as she closed the door behind her, was more mystified than Miss Gray.

"I should think she would have shown a little surprise," she said.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HALLOWE'EN HOUSE PARTY.

“MY DEAR MISS CAMPBELL:

Do you think your nice young charge would be bored by a visit to our lonely old home in the country? Percival has set his heart on giving a Hallowe'en house party for some of his particular friends, and I find Wilhelmina's name the very first on the list. I shall promise to look after her in every way exactly as if she were my own child, guard her from draughts, see that she has plenty of covering on her bed and that she wears her overshoes if the ground is damp.

My boy would be quite inconsolable, and I should too, my dear friend, if she is not to be among our guests. I cannot offer many inducements except the pleasure which young people always bring to a house, but I candidly believe that Percival would give up the idea if she should not be able to come.

Most cordially yours,

ANTOINETTE JULIANA ST. CLAIR.

Miss Campbell smiled as she handed the note to Billie one morning at the breakfast table. The two fanciful names of the good-natured, cordial widow always amused her.

"The lonely old home in the country," so modestly referred to, was one of the finest places in the county, and nothing was more coveted by the young people in West Haven than an invitation to one of Percival's house parties, where everything that the widow and her son could devise was done for the amusement of the guests.

"Of course you must go, dear. I wouldn't have you miss it for worlds. The change will do you good. I have been troubled about you lately, my child, and if this invitation had not come, I was going to insist on your seeing the doctor. I don't think your liver has been behaving itself. You have been so out of sorts. But perhaps a little amusement will be better for you than a calomel pill."

"Oh, I am quite well, Cousin Helen," exclaimed Billie. "It's mathematics, I suppose, that affects my liver."

But Billie was more eager than she would ad-

mit to accept Mrs. St. Clair's invitation. The truth is, the young girl's conscience had not been easy lately. She felt that she had done something which would have grieved and displeased her father and she could not be perfectly happy until she had confessed her sins and been forgiven.

You perhaps have guessed already that the ten new five-dollar bills which Mary Price had consigned to Miss Gray's care the morning after the robbery in the school room, was Billie's money.

"You shall take it, Mary," she insisted. "Aren't we exactly the same as sisters? I don't want the money, and I know papa would be glad if he knew."

Billie had finally agreed with Mary that it would only make matters more complicated to tell Miss Gray that fifty dollars some one had placed in Mary's desk, no doubt to tempt or catch her, as in the case of the twenty dollars, had been stolen by a robber almost immediately.

Older and wiser people would have told Billie that this was a very poor piece of advice, and the deed was no sooner accomplished than the two

girls themselves realized that they had made a mistake. Miss Gray's manner to Mary was cold and formal and the situation was not in the least relieved. The unhappy girl had hoped that the principal would speak to her again about the money, but the subject was never mentioned.

"It was all my fault, Mary. I advised you and forced you to do it. It was not exactly dishonest, but it wasn't sincere, and I am beginning to think Miss Gray is suspicious of me, too."

Another thing had happened which made Billie uncomfortably and extremely ill at ease in her mind. Burglars had broken into Mrs. Price's home, but they had only succeeded in giving Mary and her mother a great fright, and had taken nothing.

In her heart Billie knew what the robbers really wanted. It was the box of jewels locked up in Mrs. Price's safe.

"I have done wrong," she kept saying to herself. "Papa always said that my heart ruled my head and that I had no judgment. I should never have burdened Mary and Mrs. Price with that wretched box. I am almost superstitious

about it, because it brings so much bad luck on people. After the house party, I shall take it away."

As a matter of fact, everything was postponed until after the house party, and the world for eight young people seemed to stand still. The English nation could not look forward with greater eagerness to the Coronation than our four Motor Maids and their friends to Percy's Hallowe'en house party. It was only a part of the good fortune which always followed Percy that Hallowe'en that year fell on Friday, and that the weather was perfect.

They were to have three evenings of fun and frolic with the Hallowe'en ball on Friday night.

In the joy of anticipation and preparation, Billie and Mary lost sight of their troubles. Nancy was bubbling over with delight and Elinor forgot her usual sense of dignity and gave an indecorous exhibition of happiness by doing a Dutch twirl all by herself.

"Of course, we shall all go in 'The Comet,'" announced Billie. "It will be lots more fun than driving behind those poky old carriage horses

that bring Percy and Mrs. St. Clair in to church every Sunday."

"Of course," echoed the others.

There was, indeed, only one flaw in their happiness. Mrs. St. Clair, who was intimate with the Rogers family, had insisted on inviting Belle Rogers.

"Who cares?" exclaimed Billie. "She can't interfere with our good time and we certainly won't interfere with hers."

The St. Clair place was eight miles outside of West Haven on the main road. A long avenue bordered with immense pine trees led up to the commodious, comfortable old house which seemed to reflect from its shining windows the cheerful and hospitable character of its mistress.

And when the red motor pulled up in front of "Pine Lodge," as the place was called, there was the mistress herself smiling in the doorway, making the most delightful picture of welcome Billie had ever seen.

"Think of going to a real house party at last," exclaimed Billie, with a sigh of pleasure.

Percival rushed down to help them out; two

colored men servants carried in their luggage, and presently they found themselves standing before a glowing fire in the hall, which was quite big enough and broad enough to be a room itself.

"It is sweet of you to come out and cheer up two lonely country people, my dears," Mrs. St. Clair was saying, as she kissed them all around twice. "You are really the nicest children. You must promise to tell me whatever you want, or if you are not warm enough. You know how draughty country houses are. Or if you are the least hungry or your beds are not comfortable or the water isn't hot enough for your baths, or you wish any particular thing to eat——"

"Dear me," laughed Billie, looking around her, "you make us feel like four visiting princesses, Mrs. St. Clair. I am sure we could never want for anything in this cheerful, lovely house."

"Now, Mrs. St. Clair," put in Elinor, "we all know perfectly well that all the chairs at Pine Lodge are easy and the beds are famous for being the most comfortable in the county."

Mrs. St. Clair blushed with pleasure. Next to

saying nice things to people herself, she loved to have them say nice things to her.

"Percival, my darling, where are the others?" she demanded presently. "Isn't Belle coming and what is the name of that little foreign girl she asked to bring with her?"

Percy grinned at his friends good naturedly, when Merry seized a cushion from one of the long settees and began to rock it on his knees, and Charlie gave a silent imitation of a baby's face in the act of crying. But he was used to these endearing names his mother heaped upon him, and he only replied:

"Give them time, mother; give them time. Remember they didn't ride on a comet the same as this dashing company did. The foreign girl is Fannie Alta."

"So it was, and it was sweet and thoughtful of Belle to want to bring her along. She described the poor little thing as being lonely and strange in West Haven."

The girls exchanged astonished glances at this piece of news. Was it possible that Belle Rogers

and the crafty little Spanish girl whom they instinctively distrusted were so intimate as this?

“Here comes Roly Poly McLane,” cried Percy, laughing, as he peered through a side light of the front door. “She’s as jolly and fat as a clown elephant in the circus.”

“Percy, my love,” remonstrated his mother, which slight show of disapproval was about as near as she ever got in her life to scolding him.

The boys raced down the hall to help Rosomond McLane out of the high trap in which she had driven over to Pine Lodge from her home a few miles away.

“Wait, Roly Poly, until Percy gets a derrick. It’s the only safe way to unload heavy bales,” cried Merry.

“Roly Poly,” said Percy, bowing politely, “these three noble friends have volunteered with me to help you get out. I offered to do it alone, but mother was afraid my young life would be crushed out of me, if anything should happen, you know, and——”

“Percival, my darling!” cried Mrs. St. Clair.

“Help me, indeed,” exclaimed Rosomond, with

a jolly laugh that always started an echo of other jolly laughs. "Get out of my way all of you," and she gave a flying leap from the trap and bounced as she hit the ground like a rubber ball.

"My dear Rosomond," cried the widow, running down the steps to meet her, "don't take any notice of these foolish boys. You wouldn't seem the same dear, delightful Rosomond if you weighed a pound less."

"Oh, I don't mind them, Mrs. St. Clair. I'm used to it, you know. Father always calls me 'Baby Elephant' and 'Jumbo,' and the girls at school call me 'Roly Poly,' and Uncle Jim calls me 'Fatty.' "

Several more boys appeared just then and the company followed Mrs. St. Clair into what she called the sitting room, a gay apartment with chintz curtains at the windows and chintz covered cushions in the deep wicker chairs. Here they had tea and chocolate and hot-buttered toast.

"You must eat plenty of food, you know," Percy's mother had admonished them, "because I

warn you that you will need all your strength to put up with the fearful ordeals Percy has planned for to-night——”

“Mother,” broke in Percy, “you mustn’t tell. You will spoil all the fun.”

“I’m not telling, dear. I’m only warning. But you know those things that jump at you from behind——”

“Stop her quick, somebody,” cried her son, pretending to gag her mouth with a napkin.

It was all very gay and the room buzzed with talk and laughter when the door opened and a servant admitted Belle Rogers and Fannie Alta.

Mrs. St. Clair greeted the new visitors as hospitably as she had the others. She even kissed Fannie’s dark, foreign little face and called her “dear” and drew the girl down beside her on the sofa.

“I want you to feel perfectly at home,” she said. “It was so good of you to have come with Belle.”

She was really the most delightful, beaming, good-natured creature imaginable, but all her efforts could not disguise the change which seemed

suddenly to have taken place in the behavior of the others.

Somehow the laughter was less free, the talk less gay and jolly than it had been, and presently our four particular Motor Maids were glad for an excuse to go away with Percy and see the conservatories, while Belle and Fannie drank their tea with Mrs. St. Clair.

After that it was time to dress for dinner. A neat little maid had unpacked their bags and laid their best party dresses on the beds. They were very simple dresses indeed, and Nancy, at least, thought of floating blue chiffon draperies with a slight sigh of regret.

"Do you know, girls," said Billie, as she tied a pink bow around Nancy's bunch of curls, "I think we should all take lessons in cheerfulness from Mrs. St. Clair. She's so happy because she always sees the best side of everything. Just see how nice she is to Belle and Fannie Alta, for instance."

"With this beautiful house and all her money and such a nice, good-natured pink-cheeked boy

for a son, I think I could even admire Belle Rogers and Fannie Alta," observed Mary.

Then Billie remembered that Mary and her mother were always troubled about money, and that Mrs. Price was the gentlest, sweetest woman she had ever known. She wondered if Mrs. St. Clair could ever be ruffled by disappointment and bad luck, or if everything were not exactly as it should be, if she would be the same placid, good-natured soul.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GHOST PARTY.

“I don’t see how you can play any gruesome Hallowe’en tricks in this house, Mrs. St. Clair,” said Billie later at the dinner table. “It’s the abode of cheerfulness. Look at this dining room, for instance. A skull and crossbones wouldn’t even look dismal against this white wainscoting and these pale yellow walls.”

“She’s trying to pump you, mother,” put in Percy. “Now don’t tell her anything.”

Mrs. St. Clair smiled archly. How pretty she looked, Billie thought, in her pink crepe dress, with a beautiful collar of pearls around her throat. Nothing would induce the widow to wear black, and, after a year or two of mourning, she had gone back to colors and cheerfulness.

“He has got some big surprises for you, my dear. I’ll only tell you this much. It will be

quite as ghastly as you could possibly desire, and I hope nobody is wearing any clothes that will matter. Your dress, Miss Alta, I am afraid will spot if you do all the things Percy is planning for this evening. What a lovely frock, by the way. I think I have never seen a more beautiful dress for a young girl."

All eyes were fastened on Fannie's dress, and there was general surprise among the girls to see that Fannie was wearing an exquisite gown of pale blue satin with an over-dress of blue gauze, edged with narrow silver fringe. In her hair was a wreath of pink roses.

She was quite unembarrassed under the scrutiny of all these people, and smiled complacently at Mrs. St. Clair.

Nobody had taken much notice of Belle until now. They had supposed she had kept so unusually quiet because she was not in her own "set," as she loved to call her coterie of seven. But to those who were familiar with her, it was plain that something had happened. She did not seem herself. Her eyes had a strange gray look to them. Two little white dents appeared on

either side of her nose and her lips were shrunk into pale, narrow lines. But that was not all. Were they dreaming or was this the first of Percy's Hallowe'en jokes? The beautiful, proud Belle was wearing a faded yellow muslin.

She had tried to cover her shoulders with a little blue scarf, but it was impossible to deceive the sharp eyes of her schoolmates.

"Nobody's clothes will be hurt, Mother," put in Percy, feeling somehow that a cloud had fallen on the company, although he did not know enough about girls' clothes to take in this remarkable change in Belle's appearance. "Remember that this is a ghost party."

"What is a ghost party?" demanded Fannie, suddenly becoming animated from the admiration she felt she had attracted.

"Everybody wears a sheet and pillow-case," answered Percy, "and, for one thing, not a vestige of dress shows."

A look of triumph came into Belle's eyes at this and the two dents began to disappear.

"I hear the other people coming, so we had bet-

ter get into our costumes if you are entirely through."

"Come up to my room, girls. Percy will take care of the boys. Marie and I are commissioned to dress you up. I am obeying orders, you see," said Mrs. St. Clair.

"And remember that you are supposed to be disguised," called Percy. "Don't give yourself away by giggling, Miss Nancy-Bell."

"I'm sure I shan't want to giggle if I'm dressed as a ghost," answered Nancy, following the others up the steps.

Half an hour later a company of spectres invaded the halls and drawing room of Pine Lodge. There were silent ghosts and giggling ghosts, and a roly-poly ghost, who bumped against a thin ghost and knocked him flat and the thin ghost cried out:

"Oh, shades of departed Jumbo, don't sit on me!"

Then all the ghosts laughed and one ghost danced a jig that had the shadow of a resemblance to the Fishers' Horn Pipe.

Presently there was a long and mournful

trumpet call from up in the very top of the house and a portly ghost who seemed to be holding up a train under her white cotton shroud said:

"Now, my dear spirits, we are all to go up, if you will be good enough to follow me," and the whole troop of ghosts began moving in a spectral body up the front staircase.

There was a second long-drawn-out and despairing trump, and the phantom beckoned them to hurry up, with her plump, pretty hand, and remarked:

"My darling Percival is so impatient."

Up the next staircase they trooped and finally up a narrow flight, at the top of which hung a black curtain with cabalistic signs painted on it in bright red.

Once past the curtain and there was a gasp of surprise and wonder. The great attic of Pine Lodge, which stretched over the entire house, had been transformed into a spirit dance hall. From the ceiling hung pumpkin jack-o-lanterns of every size. Plates of salt and alcohol were burning about the room, giving a ghastly green-

ish look to the picture. An old witch dressed in black, with a long broomstick, was stationed by a cauldron of melted lead, placed on a charcoal stove.

Repeating a cabalistic verse with incredible rapidity, which sounded something like:

“Burra, burra pie, cat’s eye, devil fry,
Singer, dinger, singer dinger, blood!”

the black witch dropped a spoonful of the lead into a bowl of water.

“Here is your fortune,” she said, in a sing-song voice to the nearest ghost.

“The lead has taken the shape of a letter. It brings news to you. It comes from over the water on a ship. The letter is about something round——”

“Money is round,” put in a tall ghost, standing near. “So are rings and necklaces——”

“There is trouble ahead,” went on the witch. “There is trouble before the letter ever reaches land.”

The ghost who was listening moved away quickly.

"Of course, it was just a coincidence," she said to herself, "but I wonder who the person was who said that about rings and necklaces. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I wish I had never taken that box in charge."

In another part of the room a red witch was engaged in launching little fortune sail boats, made of English walnuts, on a troubled sea in a tub.

There were four other witches about the attic telling fortunes with cards and in other ways, two gray ones, a white one, and a green one, and there was an enormous gray cat with electric eyes and a tail four feet long that curled up over its back. At last from behind a curtain came the strains of weird music, and the witches and the gray cat danced a quadrille, the witches riding on their broomsticks in a circle, leaping over the cat as they advanced down the middle and finally ending with a romp when all the ghosts joined in and danced together.

After a while the ghosts removed their sheets and pillow-cases and became human beings once more, and the side shows, as Percy called them,

began. Every girl at the party bobbed for an apple, except Belle Rogers, who declined emphatically. But those who remembered the red rubber curlers understood her reasons for not wishing to wet her aureole of golden hair.

Fannie Alta plunged her face and neck into the tub with a reckless laugh, and spotted her pretty dress without a quiver of regret.

Nancy, in a little room hung in black in a remote corner of the attic, held a lighted candle over her head, while she looked fearfully in the glass and combed her hair. For just a breathing space a boy's fair, ruddy face passed across the mirror and disappeared.

With a little shriek, Nancy looked quickly over her shoulder, but she was entirely alone.

Billie went rather later than the others to try her fortune in the mirror room. She had lingered along with a laughing, teasing circle around the apple plungers, and, seeing Nancy come out of the mirror room alone, she strolled over there. Nancy explained what she was to do, and left her alone to her fate.

"Did you see any one, Nancy?" laughed Billie incredulously.

"Yes," she whispered mysteriously, "I did; but I wasn't frightened because——"

"Because what?" demanded Billie, pinching her friend's round cheek.

"Because—it wasn't a person who would frighten any one," answered Nancy, with a laugh, as she tripped away to the next side show, from whence issued suppressed screams and howls which were explained when she pulled the curtain and a skeleton jumped at her.

In the meantime, Billie had gone into the mirror room alone. She stood looking gravely at herself in the glass, while she ran a comb through her smooth locks with one hand and held a candle with the other. She seemed to have waited a good while for the apparition which was supposed to appear to show its face.

"I suppose this booth isn't in working order any longer," she thought, as she laid down the comb, when suddenly from the deep shadows reflected in the glass she made out the outline of a face.

Billie smiled. She had been prepared to recognize one of her friends, but the smile faded from her lips; she put down the candle quickly and faced about. The black curtain forming the wall of the little room was still quivering, but no one was there.

She ran out hurriedly and looked about her. All the boys and girls were dancing the barn dance, and the attic had become very cheerful and gay it seemed to her in the brief moment in which she had tried her fortune in the mirror room.

“It was just a foolish, nervous notion,” she said to herself, turning to meet Merry Brown, who was looking for her to be his partner in the dance. “But that beaked nose and that wicked eye so close to it,” her thoughts continued. “Could I have been mistaken?”

“Are there any strangers here to-night?” she asked Merry, as they danced down the room together.

“Not a single stranger,” he replied. “Only the High School crowd.”

When the dance was over, they filed in a long, laughing procession down the three flights of

steps to supper, and there was nothing spectral or gruesome about the gay party which gathered around Mrs. St. Clair's long table. Billie tried to talk and sing with the others and laugh at Roly Poly McLane and Percy, who recited an absurd dialogue they had prepared beforehand in which Roly Poly took the part of a fat, old man and Percy a thin old woman. But all the time she kept asking herself:

“Did I see him, or was it just my imagination?”

CHAPTER XVI.

A STRAY GHOST.

When the front door closed after the departing merry-makers and the sound of the last wheels died away down the avenue, the guests of the house party filed slowly up to bed. Mrs. St. Clair, at the head of the stairs, kissed each of the girls good-night and shook hands with the boys. And, as a final token of their regard, before turning in, the boys trooped from door to door, singing, "Good-night, ladies," with Charlie accompanying on his mouth organ.

And now the house was still, and our four friends in their bathrobes were seated on the hearth rug around the wood fire in one of the bedrooms, talking in whispers, as girls will do after a party.

"Do you suppose Belle Rogers has been converted, or reformed, or something?" observed Nancy. "What else could have induced her to be

so unselfish as to wear Fannie's old dress and let Fannie wear her best one?"

"It's the mystery of the age," said Elinor. "And how different she seemed, too. How quiet and meek. Perhaps, after all, it was her clothes that made her haughty. Who could be anything but lowly in a faded yellow muslin?"

"She was angry at first," put in Mary. "I saw the danger signals at dinner. But I really believe she had as good a time as any of us afterwards. Perhaps she realized that without the blue satin, she was just on a par with the rest of us, and she forgot to be conscious."

"And how different Fannie was under the influence of the blue satin," continued Elinor. "She talked and laughed quite loudly, and she was really rude to Belle several times. Girls, if we ever have blue satins, will they change our dispositions——"

A tap at the door interrupted the conversation, and Mrs. St. Clair, in a long lavender dressing gown, tripped into the room.

"I hope our talking hasn't disturbed you, Mrs. St. Clair," said Billie.

"No, no, dear, I am glad you were talking, because I had hoped to find some one of you still awake. I have come to ask a great favor. Will one of you, or all of you, go with me up in the attic for a few minutes? I should have asked one of the servants, but their lights are all out. I suppose they are sound asleep. Percy is asleep, too. I have just come from his room. He is tired out. You can't think how hard he has worked in the last few days."

"Let me go with you, Mrs. St. Clair," put in Elinor.

"Let us all go," suggested Billie.

"Very well, dear. The more of you the better. To tell the truth, I am a little worried. It's nothing, of course; I am sure to find it, but I should like to take a look before I go to bed."

"Have you lost something, Mrs. St. Clair?" asked Mary.

"Yes, I have lost my pearl necklace. I really never missed it until a few moments ago. I have looked downstairs everywhere, but I feel sure that I dropped it in the attic when I was dancing that ridiculous twirling waltz with Ben. It

serves me right for trying to be a young girl when I am really such an old lady."

"You are really the youngest of us all," protested the four young girls, following her on tiptoe up the stairs into the attic.

All the members of the searching party were sure that the necklace would be found at once somewhere on the attic floor, or in the folds of the sheet or the pillow-case Mrs. St. Clair had been wearing. Yet Billie and Mary had good reason to know that robbers were at large in the village of West Haven, and the memory of the face Billie had seen in the mirror suddenly became painfully distinct.

Mrs. St. Clair lit a few gas jets in the attic and the great place seemed ghastly enough in the half light with the grotesque jack-o-lanterns grinning at them from above; the black-curtained side shows and an occasional sheet and pillow-case made a weird picture.

They searched the floor carefully, looked into the booths with candles, shook out sheets and pillow-cases, but there was no sign of the missing necklace.

"If it had only been something else," said Mrs. St. Clair. "I should rather have lost almost anything in the world than my pearl necklace. It was a wedding present from Percival's father and I valued it more than all my other jewelry together. I don't see how I could have dropped it so carelessly. When we went down to supper I threw a scarf around my shoulders and that is probably why I never noticed that my pearls were gone. You were standing near me, Mary, and Belle and her friend were there, too. You don't remember to have noticed the necklace at that time, do you? One of you helped me on with my scarf."

Mary shook her head.

"I must ask Belle and Miss Alta to-morrow. It is so important to know whether I lost the necklace up here or below."

"Perhaps you dropped it on the steps," suggested one of the girls.

"If I did, it must have been trod on by many pairs of feet, then. Oh, dear, I am so sorry. Only this evening I said to myself, I must have

the clasp to the necklace repaired. I had intended to take it to town next week to the jeweller's.

"But I must not keep you up any longer. You were dear children to come up with me. Now go to bed and don't think of it any more. I should not have been so selfish. You are all dead tired, I know, for I am myself."

They turned and trooped downstairs again, and with softly spoken good-nights separated at their bedroom doors.

Billie and Mary were the last to enter the room they shared. They had stopped for a drink of ice water from a big glass pitcher, which had been placed with a tray of tumblers on a table at the far end of the hall. They were drinking their water silently, each absorbed in her own thoughts, when suddenly Mary grasped Billie's hand and whispered:

"Look! On the steps!"

But Billie was looking with all her eyes before Mary had spoken.

A figure was gliding down the steps wrapped in a sheet. The stray ghost had evidently seen the girls at the same moment they had caught

sight of it, for it finished the flight almost with a bound, and with a swift run disappeared through a door leading to a passage back of the steps, with Billie and Mary running behind. But the sheeted figure was too swift for them, and they heard one of the doors in the passage open and close softly just as they reached the entrance.

“It was this door,” said Mary.

“Or this one,” said Billie, pointing to the door of the room next the one Mary had chosen as the door the phantom had disappeared through.

“We’ll settle it,” said Billie. “I’ll knock on this one and you knock on that one.”

“They are the small single rooms that Belle and Fannie and Roly Poly have,” whispered Mary, as she tapped on a door.

There was no answer and she went in. It was Belle’s room and she was sleeping deeply. Mary smiled as she noticed that Belle now wore a night cap over the rubber curlers. Her cheek was pillowled on her hand and her breath came softly and regularly.

No answer came to Billie’s tap, either, and when she turned the knob she found that the door

was locked. She tapped again and rattled the knob.

"Who is there?" came a sleepy voice.

"Open the door," called Billie.

"Tell me who you are first."

"Billie Campbell."

Presently the door was thrown open and Fannie, with her dark hair standing out all over her head in a dishevelled mass, peered into the hall.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "The house is not on fire?"

"No, but Mary and I were in the hall and we saw some one come down from the attic and go into one of these rooms, and we thought we had better wake you up."

"They could not have come in here," said Fannie. "My door was locked."

Billie looked at her curiously.

"What a little actress you are," she thought.

"It doesn't matter, only Mrs. St. Clair had lost something, and we were afraid a thief might be in the house. You know there have been several robberies lately in West Haven."

Fannie gave her a long and scornful stare.

"At the High School, you mean?"

"Particularly at the High School," replied Billie gently. Somehow, she felt a sort of contemptuous pity for this unfortunate little creature who had been taught, perhaps by poverty, to stoop to so much villainy.

"What's all this racket about?" demanded Rosomond McLane, opening her door which was the third one along the passage and thrusting out her merry, round face.

"You didn't hear anything did you?" asked Billie. "Mary and I thought we saw some one in a ghost dress come down this passage and go into one of these doors."

"Good heavens! I am terrified out of my wits. I would rather it would be a burglar than a ghost. Did you really see something?"

"Forget it," said Billie. "Go back to bed and lock your door. It was just a shadow, I suppose."

Fannie had already locked her own door and the girls retreated to their room, somewhat crest-fallen, feeling very much like two fighters who had been worsted in battle."

When they had crawled into bed and settled themselves under the covers, Billie gave a deep sigh and whispered:

"Mary, dear, which one do you think it was?"

"There is only one thing that would make me think it was Belle," replied Mary. "If she had really been asleep, she would have waked and come out to find what was the matter. She is the most deadly curious soul alive."

"That's very slight evidence, Mary. She might have been specially tired to-night. Now, I believe it was Fannie. She had such a wild, dishevelled look and her door was locked. She is such a creeping, crawling little thing. Besides, I don't believe Belle would have had the courage to go up in the attic alone."

"Billie," observed Mary, after a short silence, "I don't know what it is all about, but something is going on around us. I believe that you and I, in some way, are mixed up in some kind of conspiracy. The box of jewels is in it and Fannie and Belle are in it. It's like seeing a lot of figures moving about through a thick curtain. You know they are there, but you don't know

what they are all doing. I'm frightened, Billie, very frightened."

Mary gave that dry sob which was just as painful as crying and much worse to hear.

Billie put her arms around her friend and tried to comfort her.

"Don't be scared, Mary, dear. It will all come right. I have made up my mind to one thing. That is, I will not leave that unlucky box at your mother's house any longer. We shall have to find some new place to keep it."

Presently the two girls dropped off to slumber, and of all the sleepers in the big house, only one person heard the clock in the hall strike the passing hours. She tossed and tumbled on her bed like a boat on a restless sea, and moaned to herself. Her lace-frilled night cap had slipped, and one red rubber horn pointed upward, like an accusing finger.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. RUGGLES.

Breakfast was late next morning, and there were some heavy eyes at the pretty table. Belle was pale and nervous, and Mary, too, wore an anxious look on her face. Even the plump and jovial Mrs. St. Clair was not quite herself. Her eyes had a puzzled, absent-minded expression, as if she were trying to remember something that had almost faded out of her memory. But she forced herself to smile and talk with her young guests, and only the Motor Maids really noticed her abstraction.

“What do you intend to do to-day, Percival, dearest?” she asked her son.

“Don’t you remember, mother, that Billie is to take some of us and the side-seated wagon the others over to Mrs. Ruggles? I wrote her to expect us by two this afternoon, and we’ll be hungry enough by then to eat everything in sight.”

“Who is Mrs. Ruggles?” asked Billie, who was not yet familiar with various picturesque and interesting characters living around West Haven.

“Wait until you see her,” replied Mrs. St. Clair. “She is a queer old woman, but she has a great many friends and you can’t help liking her, and her food—dear me, you never imagined such meals as she can get up.”

“Now, don’t go and give things away, mother,” remonstrated Percy. “The others have all met Mrs. Ruggles, but Billie hasn’t and neither has Miss Alta, and we might as well give them a little surprise.”

“It seems to me that West Haven is full of surprises,” observed Billie. “Papa and I used to wander about the world together like two vagabonds, but in all that time we never had so many adventures and excitements as I have had here.”

“Well, there won’t be any excitement about this trip,” said Percy. “It’s just a ride across the country to the shore, one grand, large meal, and then home again in time for another feed, and you’ll all be ready for bed.”

It was arranged for those who were to drive

to start well ahead of the others in the "handicap race," as Percy called it, in order to get to Mrs. Ruggles' at the same time. The Motor Maids went in "The Comet" with their particular friends, which was tacitly agreed upon, and Roly Poly McLane drove with Belle and Fannie and three boys in the St. Clair trim-looking depot wagon. They were not even to take the same road as the motor car, but were to go by a short cut over a road too sandy for automobiles.

Mrs. St. Clair, who was not to be in the party, inspected each girl with motherly interest before the start. She appeared to have an endless store of wraps, ulsters, sweaters and fur coats, veils and scarfs, which she bundled on her guests without the slightest regard for sex or size.

"Young people never know how to keep warm," she said. "Especially girls. They always think warm clothing is unbecoming, when really nothing is more unbecoming than purple noses and blue lips. Percival, my darling, don't you think you'll need your ear muffs?"

"No, mother," answered her son firmly, "not on the first of November."

“Oh, I implore you, my son; I entreat you,” cried the importunate woman, and Percy, with admirable patience permitted her to slip them on his ears, though he promptly removed them when the motor car had turned into the road and he could no longer see his mother waving her handkerchief.

“I must look remarkably like Dr. Cook,” he said, laughing, as he removed some of the layers of wraps and scarfs his mother had loaded him with.

“The Comet” was in splendid trim that morning.

“He gets cranky and unmanageable exactly like a human being,” Billie had often said about him, but to-day he appeared almost to take human enjoyment in the long stretch of hard-beaten road and the crisp autumn air.

“Does this mysterious Mrs. Ruggles live in a palace or a hut?” asked Billie, after a while, her curiosity increasing as the salty breeze straight from the ocean reminded her that they were approaching the coast.

“It’s a little of both,” replied Percy.

"She's a queen, herself, Mrs. Ruggles is," put in Ben.

"I believe she thinks she is one, really," said Elinor. "If she doesn't like a person, she almost says, 'Off with his head.' "

"But I thought you said she was a cook?"

"She is," answered Merry. "She's a queenly cook and a cookly queen."

"You are all a lot of crack-brained, foolish people," exclaimed Billie, exasperated. "I feel as if 'The Comet' couldn't take me fast enough to satisfy my curiosity about Mrs. Ruggles."

She put on the third speed and the red motor took to the course like a young race horse as he rounds the curve toward home. It was a long and rather chilly ride before they reached the abode of Mrs. Ruggles. The young people found themselves buttoning their wraps around them quite gratefully and snuggling down in the car.

"Here we are," said Percy, at last.

Billie stopped the car and examined with much curiosity a quaint old house, rather tumbled down at second glance, but with an air of comfort about it that no amount of disrepair could overcome.

Smoke was pouring out of the middle chimney and the reflection on the small window panes indicated that there was a roaring fire in the front room.

What the place looked like on the inside was nothing more nor less than an old Spanish inn. Billie did not know this because she had never seen one, but the room reminded her vaguely of something very romantic and picturesque, and what was most curious about the place was that the outside seemed to have no connection whatever with the inside. They were not even related to each other by distant kinship. Outside were the dignified gray walls and gabled windows of an old seashore house. The inside appeared to be one very large room. The uneven floor was paved with red tile and in a big stone fireplace at one end burned an enormous fire of driftwood. From the blackened rafters hung garlands of red peppers, bunches of herbs and strings of onions and garlic. Shining copper vessels were ranged on shelves and around two sides of the room ran a gallery with steps leading up from one end.

"Am I in a dream," cried Billie. "I feel as if I had been transported somewhere suddenly."

"Isn't it fascinating?" said Elinor. "The old house has been in Mrs. Ruggles' family for two hundred years. It used to be a sort of sailors' inn, and there are many stories connected with it. But here she comes herself. She's just as wonderful as her house."

Mrs. Ruggles was certainly a remarkable figure. She was very tall, one of the tallest women Billie had ever seen, with coal black hair, shiny dark eyes, rather too close together, a beaked eagle nose, and a very determined mouth, with a slightly humorous curve to the lips, which softened her somewhat stern face.

She wore a most outlandish dress for that part of the world, of striped red and black cotton, but she was scrupulously clean, and the coarse cotton kerchief tied around her neck was as white as snow. Her stockings also were white, and she wore men's low shoes of enormous size, even for a woman of her height.

The boys and girls all shook hands with her as if she were an old friend. She called them

by their first names and when she was introduced to Billie she gave her a long, keen look that seemed to read the young girl's most hidden and secret thoughts. She walked with an erect carriage and majestic tread, and Billie had a feeling that she had been introduced to a personage.

"She's a great old girl," said Merry Brown, when Mrs. Ruggles had disappeared into the back regions of the house to finish cooking the dinner. "She can sail a boat as well as anybody along this coast. She fishes, digs for clams, catches lobsters in traps, and does all the things the fishermen around here do and more, too, because she is the jim dandiest cook in the county."

"Hasn't she any husband or family?" asked Billie.

"She was married twice. Ruggles, the second husband, was an Irishman. He was a fine fellow, a sea captain, but he died long ago. Her children are floating about the country somewhere."

"What was her name before she married. Nothing like Ruggles, I am sure."

"No, it was Sabater. Mrs. Ruggles' father was captain of a schooner which carried freight

up and down the coast. They say her grandfather was a great old fighter and came near being hanged as a spy by both sides in the Revolution."

It was all very interesting, and Billie was still asking questions of the others when the carriage arrived with the rest of the party.

"Why, where is Fannie?" they demanded, noticing her absence from the depot wagon.

"She complained of a headache and went home," answered Belle. "We met one of your vehicles on the road, Percy, coming from town, and she got in and drove back."

"Too bad," answered Percy. "But she's very sensible if she doesn't feel well. It's a long drive and fairly chilly when it gets late."

Fannie was not much missed, however, from the jolly party which now gathered around the crackling wood fire. Presently the inn-keeper, fish-woman, queen, whatever she was, led the girls up the narrow flight of stairs at one end of the room to the balcony, on which opened a row of little bedrooms, like ship cabins. She was a very silent, busy woman, and she did not linger

while they smoothed their rumpled locks and washed the dust from their faces.

Billie, who also was not one to linger at the dressing table, went out on the gallery and stood looking down into the picturesque room. The place fascinated her and she strolled along, peeping into the other small rooms, where, no doubt, Mrs. Ruggles' father and grandfather had put up many a seafaring guest in years gone by.

At the other end of the gallery were more rooms, and she could not resist the temptation to glance into them while she waited for the other girls. Two of the doors were open, one into a large empty room and one into a scantily furnished bedroom. The next door was half closed. Should she look in? Billie hesitated. It was very impolite of her, but she knew that old Mrs. Ruggles lived alone, and there could be no one to intrude on. She pushed the door gently and looked in, then retreated quickly. The room was not empty, after all. In the immense, old-fashioned bed so high that it was necessary to stand on a foot stool at one side in order to plunge into it, lay a woman. Billie thought she was asleep at

first. Her eyes were closed and her long black hair was spread back of her on the pillow like a dusky mantel. The young girl stood transfixed on the threshold. Then the woman opened her eyes and looked straight into Billie's.

"I beg your pardon," said Billie politely, and backed away, her heart beating so fast that she almost choked for breath.

The others were just going downstairs, chatting and laughing together, even Belle Rogers, who seemed, somehow, softened and quite different. There was no chance to tell about the strange woman just then, and Billie kept her knowledge to herself. But the large dark eyes haunted her memory and she could not forget the face, of which she had caught only a fleeting glance.

Then came the dinner. Mrs. Ruggles did not wait on the guests. The dishes were placed on the table and they helped themselves, while Merry and Percy, with napkins over their arms, like well-trained butlers, removed one set of plates and brought on another.

Perhaps these young people, who were not

epicures by any means, did not realize how delicious Mrs. Ruggles' dinner really was. But an older and more experienced person would have appreciated some of those delightful concoctions of rice and pimentoes, soup thick and rich, fowls done to a turn, and a dish of corn meal and chopped meat and tomatoes, like a Mexican to-male. But they enjoyed it and the pudding that followed and the cups of strong black coffee.

It was a merry meal, too, with jokes and songs and much laughter. Mrs. Ruggles moved ponderously about the room or sat silently by the fire. Occasionally her face lit up with a delightful smile, and she would turn and beam approvingly at Percy or Merry or Roly Poly McLane, who were the chief fun-makers.

After dinner Billie seized an opportunity to speak to the strange woman.

"We had a splendid dinner, Mrs. Ruggles," she said. "I should think you would have lots of people stopping here in this delightful place."

"The Inn is closed now," she answered. "I don't rent my rooms any more."

"And you have no guests at all?" asked Billie.

Mrs. Ruggles looked at her for so long that Billie felt desperately uncomfortable.

"No," she answered shortly, and began clearing off the table with a scowl that reminded Billie of some one somewhere.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FANNIE ALTA.

In the meantime, Mrs. St. Clair, left to the quiet seclusion of her own home, became forthwith a very determined and resolute character.

First she summoned to her aid the old colored butler, who had been with her many years, and together they searched every part of the house where she had been the night before. They went over the attic thoroughly and satisfied themselves that the lost pearl necklace could not have been dropped there. They hunted through the down-stairs rooms, shook out the sofa cushions, looked under the rugs and behind curtains. There was not a crack nor cranny of the rooms she had lately frequented that Mrs. St. Clair and old Randolph did not scour.

Like many another easy-going, amiable soul, Mrs. St. Clair, when roused to action, was capable of the most surprising, almost fierce de-

termination, and when Fannie Alta returned, pleading the excuse of a headache, she hardly recognized in the white intense face, the rosy, dimpled countenance of the widow.

Fannie retired to her room, but when Mrs. St. Clair went to the telephone in the upper hall, she crept to the door, opened it a crack, and overheard snatches of this conversation:

“Do you happen to have a good detective? That’s fortunate. The famous Mr. Bangs home on his vacation? Has a motor cycle? Very well, he ought to get here in an hour. Tell him to hurry. Thank you. Good-by.”

A tray of luncheon was brought to Fannie, but she ate very little. She sat in her room thinking hard. Then, with a sudden resolution, she jumped up and began to move about. First she packed her valise. Then, tying her handkerchief about her head, she put on a very woe-begone expression and left the room. Mrs. St. Clair was in the living room, a maid told her, and Fannie found her pacing nervously up and down the bright, chintz-hung place.

“I am afraid you are not feeling so well, Miss

Alta," the widow said politely, but with just a shade of coldness in her tone.

"I am much worse," answered Fannie. "I feel quite ill. I wish to return to my mamma. May I be driven home?"

Mrs. St. Clair hesitated and a very strange expression came into her face.

"You may go in a few hours, Miss Alta. There is no one to take you just now. Randolph is needed here and the other men are off working on the place. Perhaps you had better lie down in your room until I can arrange to send you back. Did you try the aromatic spirits of ammonia?"

"If no one can take me," said the Spanish girl irritably, not taking any notice of the question, "I shall walk."

"But I thought you were ill?"

"I am, but the walk will help my head."

"No, I cannot permit it," said Mrs. St. Clair firmly. "Go to your room and in another hour you will be sent home."

Fannie started to reply, but she checked herself and left the room. Mrs. St. Clair, stripped of

her smiles and good-natured pleasantries, was not a person to be disobeyed, and Fannie was quick to recognize that fact.

She had hardly reached the second floor, when she heard the whirring sound of a motor cycle, followed almost immediately by a quick ring of the bell. Fannie leaned far over the banisters, and when she turned to go to her room, after a small, dapper-looking man had been admitted, she was somewhat embarrassed to find Mrs. St. Clair's maid looking at her with an expression of extreme amazement.

Fannie hurried to her room and for the next fifteen minutes stood irresolutely first on one foot, then on the other. Finally, with an air of determination, she opened her satchel.

In the sitting room downstairs Mrs. St. Clair and Mr. Bangs were in close conference.

"I do not really know the girl, Mr. Bangs. She is a Cuban or a South American, or something. Her name is Alta and she was brought here by my son's guest. It is impossible for me to accuse a visitor in my own house of stealing the most valued and handsomest possession I have

in the world. She is a queer little creature and looks sly and unreliable to me. But, of course, that is not really evidence. What I have been racking my brain all night and morning to recall is whether it was not she who, when she helped me off with my ghost dress last night, fumbled at my neck a moment.

"It amounts to this, Mr. Bangs," the widow continued after a pause, "I can't get over the impression that she has stolen my necklace. The other children here I have known all their lives. My servants have been with me for years, and she is the one suspicious person in the house. Now, what I want you to do is to help me to find out the whole thing without arousing her suspicions. If she is the thief, she may return the necklace, and be sent back to town before the others arrive, and it will be easy enough to make excuses. You are a very able man, Mr. Bangs, and I know that you are only home for a rest, but I do so need your help. Now, what do you advise?"

"Have you looked among her things yet?" asked the detective.

"No, because the conviction only came to me after she returned. I did have suspicions, I will admit, but I put them aside. When she came back I saw that she was uneasy and anxious, and only a few moments ago she asked to be sent home."

"H-m," mused the detective. "Suppose," he continued, "that you call her down and let me talk to her as if I needed her assistance, she being the only member of the party available."

The advice was acted upon, and presently Fannie, still with the handkerchief swathing her forehead, looking very nervous and pale, entered the room.

"Miss Alta," began the widow kindly, "I am sorry to have disturbed you when you were ill, but we are in great trouble and we thought perhaps you might help us. Did you know that last night I lost my beautiful pearl necklace, the most precious thing I have in the world?"

Fannie showed great surprise.

"Did it not come unclasped and slip?" she suggested.

"I have reason to believe that it did not slip from my neck, because we have searched the place thoroughly. It must have been taken. I talked it all over with the other girls last night and they helped me look for it, but now I need some one else, and in their absence I have sent for you. Mr. Bangs, who is a detective, has come down to lend me his aid, and we thought we might take you into the conspiracy with us."

The widow paused for breath.

Fannie sat down and folded her hands nervously.

"I do not see how I can help," she said, after a pause.

"Possibly you cannot," put in Mr. Bangs, "but Mrs. St. Clair thought you might have noticed something unusual, and being a guest were too polite to speak of it. For instance, were you standing near Mrs. St. Clair when she removed the sheet and pillow case?"

"Yes," said Fannie, "there were several of us in the party."

"Did you notice who unpinned the sheet for Mrs. St. Clair?"

Fannie paused a long time without replying.

"It was not you who did it?"

The young girl compressed her lips and looked the detective squarely in the eye.

"The girl who unpinned the sheet was Mary Price," she replied, "and since you are determined to question me, I will tell you."

She drew a deep breath, looked first at the detective, then at Mrs. St. Clair, and proceeded:

"I did notice that she removed the sheet from your shoulders and her actions were very strange. But, knowing what I did, I was not surprised, and I am not surprised to hear now that you have lost something valuable, Mrs. St. Clair," she went on, more and more glibly, as she saw she was gaining the interest of the other two.

"What were Miss Price's actions?" asked the detective, taking Fannie's statements in the order she had made them.

Fannie frowned.

"Oh, I do not know. She was strange. She behaved strangely and she went away at once."

"You mean she left the room?"

"I cannot say. I saw her no more until supper."

"Where were you?"

"Oh, I was about, dancing, playing, laughing with the others," replied Fannie carelessly.

"You said a moment ago you knew something about Miss Price. Will you tell us what it is?"

"Ah, but I hesitate. It is unkind to spread so terrible a story."

"We will treat it confidentially," said the detective drily.

"A great many people know it already," went on Fannie. "The whole school knows it, in fact. Miss Gray, the principal, and some of the teachers, who have lost money and articles. I, myself, have good reason to know it."

"What is it that you know?" asked the detective.

"That Mary Price is a thief. She has been stealing all the autumn from the other girls and the teachers at the High School."

"Oh, impossible! I will not believe it," cried Mrs. St. Clair. "Dear, sweet, quiet Mary. There must be some mistake, Miss Alta. You

should be more careful how you spread such dangerous gossip. Mary Price and her mother have many devoted friends in West Haven."

"You may ask Miss Gray, then. She will tell you," said Fannie stiffly.

"Just to verify your statement, Miss Alta, I will telephone Miss Gray this instant," exclaimed the widow angrily, leaving the room and hastening upstairs to the telephone.

While she was gone, and she was away some time, the detective began to question Fannie. He was a very experienced man in his profession and he pressed her so skillfully that several times she tripped in her answers and finally grew excited.

"I tell you it is true," she cried. "She not only is a thief, but she has a confederate. Billie Campbell is her assistant. Perhaps you think I took the necklace," she burst out at last. "You have the right to search among my things. I had no way to know that suspicion rested on me. If I took the necklace, it will still be among my things."

"Don't get excited, Miss Alta, nobody has accused you of anything. We simply needed your

valuable evidence. Why do you say Miss Campbell is a confederate to the thieving?"

Fannie had gone farther than she intended, however, and she refused to give any more information. But the detective saw that when she was angry and frightened, she would talk, and after a pause, he said:

"You perhaps know that you are the only person in the household on whom suspicion might rest."

"I don't see why I should be suspected," she exclaimed hotly, "when Mary Price is already known to be a thief——"

"Perhaps you have a grudge against Miss Price?"

"I have not," she cried, stamping her foot.

"Did no one ever suspect you of taking the things at the High School? You know that often happens—one girl is blamed for another's——"

Fannie flew into a passion.

"I tell you Billie Campbell and Mary Price are thieves. They have a whole box of valuable things they have stolen, stored away in Mrs. Price's safe."

"What sort of things?"

"Jewelry," burst out Fannie, then stopped and bit her lip. "But I may be mistaken about that," she added, trying to speak calmly.

Mrs. St. Clair hurried into the room with the necklace in her hand.

"Where did you find it?" asked Mr. Bangs.

"I found it," she began, then paused. "It was found," she added. "You may go, Miss Alta. Thank you very much. And if you care to go back to town, Randolph will drive you in at once."

When Fannie had left the room, the widow beat her hands together, and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I found it in Mary Price's bag," she said. "And Miss Gray tells me that it is true. Mary has been suspected of stealing all autumn."

CHAPTER XIX.

MARY BEFORE HER JUDGES.

It was late when the young people returned from Mrs. Ruggles'. They were in gay spirits and Mrs. St. Clair could hear them talking and laughing in the hall, first the motorists and then the ones who had driven. She did not go down to meet them and they scattered to their rooms to wash their faces and smooth their wind-blown locks. There was no time to dress for supper.

"I don't see how I can face them," she said to herself. "I'm so unhappy, and I'm afraid they will notice that I have been crying."

But she bathed her temples in cold water, put on a cheery-colored silk dress, and went down-stairs when the gong sounded for supper. Down trooped the boys and girls with sparkling eyes and glowing cheeks. The sound of their happy laughter reached her below and she pressed her

hand to her heart and sighed deeply. Then her expression hardened:

"Little wretch," she exclaimed. "She should be well punished, and she shall be, too."

"‘Soup of the evening, beautiful soup,’" sang Merry, dancing a jig in the hall:

"‘Beautiful soup so rich and green,
Waiting in a hot tureen!’"

"‘Who for such dainties would not stoop?
Soup of the evening, beautiful soup,’"

continued Rosomond, seizing Merry's hands and whirling with him up and down the hall until they both fell in a laughing heap on the floor.

"Oh, we have had such a good time," cried Billie and Mary together, taking each a hand of Mrs. St. Clair.

"It has been such glorious fun," went on Billie, "and we are just as hungry for supper as if we hadn't eaten enough food to feed a regiment this afternoon."

"And such fine food, too, Mrs. St. Clair," said Mary. "I think it was the most delightful party I have ever been to."

"I am glad you were so happy," replied Mrs. St. Clair, making an effort to smile and succeeding very poorly.

Mary, who was as sensitive to changes in manner as an aeolian harp is to the slightest breeze, looked at her hostess quickly and noticed the red rims on her eyelids.

"Aren't you feeling well, dear Mrs. St. Clair?" she asked gently.

Mrs. St. Clair put her hands on the girl's shoulders and looked into the clear dark eyes.

"I am quite well, Mary. A little upset over something that happened to-day. That is all."

"You mean the pearl necklace?"

"Yes."

"I am so sorry. I wish we could have found it for you."

"It has been found, Mary," said the widow, turning her head away so as not to see Mary's face.

"Oh, you did find it? I am so glad. Where was it?"

"Supper is served, Mrs. St. Clair," said Ran-

dolph, opening the door to the dining room, where the others were already waiting.

"We will talk about where it was found later," she said to Mary, who gave her a puzzled look, as she followed into the room.

When supper was over, the boys and girls scattered about the various rooms. Roly Poly and Nancy got up charades. Billie curled up in a big easy chair by the fire. She had got most of the wind in her face and she was very sleepy. No one noticed, therefore, when Mrs. St. Clair, drawing Mary's hand through her arm, led her out of the room.

"I want to see you upstairs, Mary," she said. "Will you come to my little private sitting room? There is something I wish to talk with you about."

Mary was still wondering what in the world could be wanted of her, when Mrs. St. Clair drew her into a pretty little pink boudoir at the end of the hall. The door to the next room had been left open, but Mary did not notice a small, dapper man sitting there in a high-backed cretonne chair.

The pearl necklace was lying on a table in the boudoir. Mrs. St. Clair picked it up and held it out to Mary.

"Did you ever see it closely before, Mary?" she asked.

"No, I never did," answered the girl, with enthusiasm. "How beautiful it is. No wonder you were so unhappy. But where did you find it?"

"That is just why I brought you in here, Mary. I wanted to ask you if you could guess where the necklace had been found at last."

Mary suddenly became very grave. She was beginning to notice now that Mrs. St. Clair was in an unusually serious frame of mind and that something must have happened concerning the necklace which the others had not heard.

"I don't understand," she said, after a pause.
"Why should I guess?"

"Is it possible, Mary," exclaimed the widow, "that even after you were told I had found the necklace you were not just a little frightened, a little uneasy? Didn't you suspect when I asked you to come up here with me that I was going to speak to you about the necklace?"

Mary looked at her in wonder for a few minutes. Then a light dawned on her.

"It's Fannie Alta again," she said, in a low voice. "She must have put the necklace among some of my things."

"Then you do know where I found the necklace?" cried the widow triumphantly.

"I can guess," said Mary. "You found it in my suit case. It's the second time she's done something like that."

"Mary, Mary—don't blame it on any one else. I did find the necklace in your valise——"

Mary stood up. Her eyes were blazing and her small slender frame was shaken with emotion.

"Do you mean to insinuate that I stole your pearl necklace?" she cried.

Her words rang out in a high, clear tone that made the small man in the next room stir uneasily.

"How else did the necklace get into your bag, Mary?"

"Fannie Alta put it there. She put twenty dollars into my pocket not long ago and tried to ac-



"Do you mean to insinuate that I stole your pearl necklace?"

cuse me of taking that, and when I gave it back to her she hadn't a word to say."

"But, Mary, Fannie is not your only accuser. Miss Gray tells me that you have been suspected of many thefts since school opened."

"Oh, oh!" cried Mary. "How dare she? How dare any one? What have I done that these people should try to make me out a thief? Oh, mother, mother!"

"That is just why I brought you up here to-night, Mary. On account of your sweet, lovely mother. I want you to make me a promise in return for what I am going to do for you. I promise not to push this matter any farther. It shall never reach your mother's ears. She will be spared all distress and misery, if you promise me never again, as long as you live, to steal. It was not nice of you, Mary, staying here as my guest to steal from me. Will you make me that promise?"

Mary did not reply. She sat down and clasped her hands in her lap. Once or twice her throat quivered with the little sob, which so went to Billie's heart. She pressed her hands together

and closed her eyes for a moment. Her face was so pale that Mrs. St. Clair thought she was going to faint, but her lips were moving.

"Oh, God, help me," she prayed softly. "Tell me what to say."

Presently her agitation ceased altogether. She opened her eyes and looked calmly at the widow.

"No, I will not promise you that, Mrs. St. Clair, because I have never stolen anything in my life. I would prefer that my mother should know about this. I don't wish to keep it from her. She would never believe me guilty, no matter what the evidence was against me, even if I had to go to jail. You say you found the necklace in my bag? How did you happen to look for it there?"

"You see, I believed that Fannie Alta had taken it, and when we brought her into the living room and urged her to tell what she knew, she accused you. I would not believe it, however, until I had called up Miss Gray. It was only after that that I looked in your bag."

Mary stood up.

"I know that things look very black for me,

Mrs. St. Clair. I don't understand why, but there is a conspiracy in the High School. It seems to have formed around Billie and me in particular. But there is something else, too. Something is going on in West Haven—something too big for us to understand. Billie and I are in it, and Fannie Alta is in it, and sometimes I think even Belle Rogers is, too. I don't know what it all means, or why it should have anything to do with making me a thief, but I am not a thief, and I did not put the necklace in my bag. Good-night. I will not see you again. As soon as morning comes, Billie and I will go back in the motor. I know she will take me if I ask her."

Mary walked quietly out of the room.

"That's a girl of fine spirit," thought Mr. Bangs. "The case is certainly interesting enough to keep me here another week."

CHAPTER XX.

MISS CAMPBELL WEARS BLACK.

Mary went straight to her room that night and packed her bag. When Billie came up a little later she found her kneeling beside her bed, her face hidden in her hands. It seemed to the unhappy young girl in her misery and danger that no human power could aid her.

When Billie heard the story, she was so angry with Mrs. St. Clair and Miss Gray and Fannie Alta that she took an imaginary aim and pitched both shoes across the room with all her force.

“Oh, my dear, my dear,” she cried, throwing her arms about her friend’s neck with affectionate fervor, “you have at least one devoted friend who will stand by you through everything.”

Mary was touched by Billie’s devotion and by and by the two girls dropped off to sleep in spite of their troubled hearts.

But they were up and dressed before any one

except the servants was stirring in the house. Randolph, greatly amazed, and imploring the young ladies to wait and take at least a cup of coffee, led the way to the carriage house where the motor had been left.

"Tell Mrs. St. Clair," said Billie, "that I was called home early and will write to her."

No one knew but the colored servant, and he did not understand, that Mary and Billie had refused to eat anything in a house where one of them had been called a thief.

"Mary, tell your mother the whole story," said Billie, as she dropped her friend at "The Sign of the Blue Tea Pot." "Tell her not to be uneasy. Your friends know you are innocent and it is all obliged to come out right."

Then she dashed around the Square, turned up Cliff Street, and stopped at the home of Miss Helen Campbell.

"No, I haven't had breakfast," she said to the old man servant, who opened the door. "I'll eat with Cousin Helen if she hasn't breakfasted."

"Miss Campbell will not eat any breakfast this morning, Miss Billie," replied the butler.

"Is she ill?"

"No, Miss," the old man lowered his voice, "but she's wearing her black dress."

Billie frowned.

"Is it an anniversary?" she asked.

"No, Miss. That's just the queer part. It ain't the anniversary. We know when that comes now. But something's happened."

"Nothing to do with papa?" she asked anxiously.

"No, no, Miss."

"I'll have some breakfast, then," she said. "I'm very hungry from the ride in town."

Billie ate a hurried but hearty meal alone.

"I never can do anything when I'm empty," she often said, and instinctively she felt that trouble of some sort was brewing.

After breakfast she tapped on her cousin's door.

"Come in," came the tremulous answer, and Billie entered a darkened room.

Miss Campbell, looking faded and pale and wearing a black crepe dress, was sitting alone at the far end of her apartment. Her hands were

crossed on her breast like a mediæval saint's, and she looked the very picture of hopeless misery.

"Dear Cousin Helen, what has happened?" cried Billie, running to the little lady and kneeling beside her chair. "Is it something very terrible?"

Miss Campbell put her arm around the girl's neck and two tears slipped down her faded cheeks.

"Billie, Billie, why have you deceived me so?" she exclaimed. "How could you have done this terrible thing? Oh, my dear, my dear, I have been so unhappy, and Mrs. Price, too. We have wept together."

"What in the world?" cried Billie.

"The jewels, my dear. The box of wonderful jewels that you have kept. How could you have done such a thing? I know many young girls who would have been tempted by them. But not you, my dear, dear Billie. And Mary, too. Oh, heavens, I am so unhappy!"

Miss Campbell was so shaken by her sobs and weeping that Billie was obliged to wipe her eyes with her own handkerchief.

"But, dearest Cousin," she said at last. "We haven't done anything dishonest, or that we might be ashamed of. How did you find out about the box and who told you such a slander about us?"

After being bolstered up with aromatic nerve drops and eau de cologne, Miss Campbell was able to speak coherently.

"Yesterday a man came here to see me. He sent up his name and the message that he wished to speak to me about something in regard to you, so I had him shown in. And then, my child, he told me such a story. How his motor car had been wrecked on the very day we went to Shell Island and a box of jewels belonging to his wife had fallen in the sand. He had good reason to know, he said, that you had found the jewels and, instead of trying to find the owner or answering advertisements and notes, had kept them all this time in Mrs. Price's safe. He gave me a list of the jewels and an exact description. I went at once to Mrs. Price. We found the combination, opened the safe, and got out the box. There they were, just as he had described them. Oh,

my dear, what mortification! What will your father say?"

"Did you give him the jewels?" exclaimed Billie, without waiting to make explanations until this important point was settled.

"The man was very insistent. He has threatened to arrest you and Mary and even Mrs. Price. Think of that! For harboring stolen goods."

"Did you give them to him?" cried Billie, impatiently.

"No, Mrs. Price refused to let him have them until she had seen you and Mary. For my part, I should have given them to the man and let him go. We had a terrible scene with him, but Mrs. Price was firm. She said it would do no harm for him to wait until she had seen you and she would not allow him to take them."

"Thank heavens for that," burst out Billie. "Then the box is in Mrs. Price's safe?"

"No, I had it brought here for safe-keeping. The man was so angry he made threats and I thought it would be better to get it away from Mrs. Price's at least."

"What was the man's name?"

"Lafitte. He wrote it on a piece of paper."

"Lafitte?" echoed Billie. "What did he look like?"

"I cannot really recall, my dear. I was so agitated. But I think there was something wrong about one eye."

"He had only one eye," Billie almost shrieked in her excitement.

"I believe so, and only one arm. But you will see him. He will be back this morning."

"Cousin Helen, he will never come back. He is a thief and a robber and a smuggler. He is everything that is wicked and bad. I don't know how he found out that we had the jewels, but he has been hot on our track ever since. I will tell you the real story of the jewels and then you will see what an injustice you have done us."

When Billie had finished the strange tale, Miss Campbell looked at her with a peculiar expression.

"It's a very remarkable story, my dear. And if I did not know you as well as I do, I could almost think you had imagined it. And I was

there all the time. You should have confided in me. 'The woman was insane, I suppose.'

"She was not," insisted Billie. "She was perfectly sane and very beautiful. The man who calls himself 'Lafitte' is not the right person, and he shall not have the jewels until I hear from her or from the right Lafitte. You may be sure he will not dare have me or any one else arrested. We know too much about him already."

"But what are we to do with the things, child? They have brought nothing but trouble on you since you have had them."

"Suppose you put them in your safety box at the bank for a few days. There is something much more important than this at stake now. Mary has been accused of being a thief by Mrs. St. Clair and Miss Gray. It is a terrible thing. Mrs. St. Clair wouldn't listen to reason."

Billie related to her cousin what had happened the day before and the chain of events which led up to it.

"Oh, poor dear Mrs. Price! My unfortunate friend. What shall we do, Billie?" exclaimed the sympathetic little woman.

"I don't know yet, Cousin Helen. The whole thing is too much for me, but I have a scheme. Are there any detectives in West Haven?"

"Call up the police station," her cousin suggested, and presently Billie's voice could be heard in the hall:

"Have you a good detective? Bangs, you say. Send him to Miss Campbell's please; upper Cliff Street, and the sooner the better. Good-by."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MISSING LINK.

Mr. Bangs made three calls on that memorable Monday. The first was to Billie, as you already surmise. If he recognized the strong undercurrent which connected the strange adventures of the Motor Maids during the past two months, he said nothing, but listened gravely to the young girl's account of the happenings in Boulder Lane, the box of jewels, the cases of rifles at Seven League Island, and so on through the events which have been told in this history.

When Billie had finished, she paused and waited for the detective to speak, but he sat silently twirling his thumbs and looking down at the floor with half-closed eyes.

Billie was slightly irritated.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Bangs," she continued with some dignity, "because, while I am certain of two things, I'm not at all sure of the

third. The first is that Fannie Alta has some very good reason for trying to prove that Mary is a thief. The second is that this smuggler who has been trying to steal the jewels has something to do with it."

"And what is the third, Miss Campbell?" asked the detective, smiling, without looking up.

"That is what I want you to tell me," exclaimed Billie restlessly. "There is a third. It is the missing link. And it is what I wanted you to find out for me. I have thought and thought and puzzled and puzzled, but I can't make it out. I believe with all my soul that there is some wicked force back of the whole thing."

Mr. Bangs raised his eyes at last and looked at the young girl with evident admiration.

"You are taking the first step toward making a good detective, Miss Campbell," he said. "You have expressed it in three words. It is the missing link we need to get at in this business and it is what I must find."

Billie flushed with pleasure at this professional praise. She had never had occasion to play the

part of detective before. But devotion and loyalty to her friend had sharpened her wits.

“Now, why?” asked the detective. “Isn’t Miss Alta the missing link?”

“That is the strangest part of the whole business. She is a piece of the link, I think, but then she has nothing against Mary and me. There would be no object to what she has done unless she had.”

“You did not know that she accused you of being the confederate of your friend or that she knew that you had the box of jewels hidden in the safe?”

“What?” cried Billie, with amazement. “But how did she know——” she began.

“Yes, how?”

Billie sat looking down at her hands. She was not thinking of those slender, strong fingers, which appeared to clasp each other with a friendly grip. Her thoughts were busy going back over the past few weeks.

“I think I’ve found the missing link,” she said at last, with a serious look in her eyes, as she turned toward the detective. “Belle Rogers is

the missing link. I can't understand why I haven't thought of it before, but it seemed so incredible."

"Miss Campbell," put in Mr. Bangs severely, "I am afraid you are not such a good detective, after all. You have left out one of the most important things. You did not tell me that some one besides your three friends knew about the jewels."

Billie had omitted the story of the confusion of the two suit cases at Shell Island. She had really quite forgotten it and Mr. Bangs chuckled with amusement when he heard how Belle had opened and examined all the contents of another girl's suit case out of pure curiosity.

"Then she must have read the name on the card, too," he said presently.

"I suppose so."

"Now, tell me, Miss Campbell, what is the grudge which this young lady perhaps has against you and your friends?"

"Oh, it's only a silly schoolgirl affair," replied Billie. "I am ashamed to tell you, because it seems so utterly trivial in comparison to other

things. She was angry because I wouldn't join her club and because we saw her the night of the fire with her hair up in rubber curlers."

The detective laughed outright.

"That's a woman's reason for taking revenge," he said.

"And she was angry again because I took her into the wrong room, when the hotel was burning and we had to escape over the roof."

"Humph!" exclaimed the detective. "Insult piled onto injury, eh? So this Miss Rogers is a very vindictive character?"

Billie hesitated. It went against her straightforward, honest nature to malign even Belle Rogers.

"She has been spoiled all her life," she said, "and you know how spoiled children must have their own way. That is all. She was angry because she planned to make me a member of her club and queen it over me as she does over the others, and I disappointed her. Her mother and friends have taken good care always that she should never be disappointed and she just didn't know what the feeling was, I suppose."

"She must be quite a remarkably spoiled young woman to go to such lengths for such a trivial offence. But we sometimes get in deeper than we intend, you know."

The detective rose to go.

"Good day, Miss Campbell," he said, giving her hand quite a warm grip, considering what a quiet, cold individual he had seemed at first. "You will hear from me again, soon. I had not intended to work when I came down here. You know I am a West Haven boy. My father was old Bill Bangs, the jailer. You probably have heard of him. He was a famous character in his day. I came home to rest and see my people, but when a detective scents a good case he is not apt to let it slip by, even on a holiday."

"And you think this is a good case?"

"It's a corking one," he replied, as he closed the door after him.

Billie and Mary did not go to school that famous Monday. Billie had no mind to face the curious looks she felt certain would be turned upon her by the other girls, because news travels quickly in any school. Mary was lying on her

mother's bed with a throbbing sick headache. All day Mrs. Price sat beside her daughter and held her hand. At intervals she bathed her temples with eau de cologne and whispered:

"My dearest, it will come out all right. Mother loves you and believes in you and so does Billie. Don't sob like that for my sake, my little girl."

Belle Rogers also stayed at home that Monday. Mr. Bangs discovered this fact on his second visit of the day when he was closeted for an hour or more with Miss Gray and Mrs. St. Clair in the principal's private office.

After a tiresome interview with these two well meaning but mistaken ladies, in which he said little and they said much, he left the High School with a sigh of relief.

Presently he found himself in the fashionable district of West Haven. It was the second time he had climbed the street that day, but he was a calm little person, not easily heated by emotion or exercise, and when he rang the bell at the Rogers home, there was just the suspicion of a smile on his face. He sent up his card for Miss

Rogers and word was brought back that Miss Rogers was ill and not to be seen. Then, with a pencil, he wrote across the face of the card, "Lafitte—Paris."

In three minutes the swish of skirts down the steps announced that some one was coming.

"I hope it's not the mother," he said to himself.

But it was Belle, very pale, with violet circles around her eyes and a nervous quivering about the lips.

When Mr. Bangs left the Rogers house after spending three-quarters of an hour with Belle, he remarked as he strolled down the gravel driveway to the street:

"It will have to be an out and out confession from one or the other. If this one doesn't give it, the Alta girl must. I shall pay my respects to Mme. Alta this evening."

He had hardly passed through the great iron gateway leading into the street, when Belle, wearing a heavy veil and a long ulster, hurried after him. She carried a music roll under her

arm, although she was not taking lessons, since she had been injured in the fire, but it was understood by the servant who opened the door for her that she was going to see Mme. Alta.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE REFUGEES.

A ship had sailed into the little harbor of West Haven on Monday morning. She carried a load of lumber from down the coast and after showing her clearance papers and discharging her cargo with all due formality, she hoisted sails again and moved around the curve of the harbor into a deep inlet, where she rested at anchor in a position just opposite Boulder Lane.

Darkness fell very early that Monday afternoon as those who were not in their homes will remember.

Mr. Bangs will recall the inky blackness of the lowering sky, as he came out of the telegraph office, where he had wired to his chief to send down another man, and turned his steps toward the rooms occupied by Mme. Alta.

Our Motor Maids have not forgotten how they sped back to town after a swift ride in their be-

loved "Comet," in the late afternoon, when they discussed the situation long and earnestly.

Three figures turned into Boulder Lane as the motor car flashed past, but the girls were too intent on their conversation to notice them. The first, who was a tall, stout woman, walked stoically along with the tread of a grenadier. She carried a large suit case with one hand and an enormous bundle with the other. Her two upper teeth protruding over her lower lip gave her that strange animal look which Billie had disliked so much. For it was Mme. Alta, as you have no doubt guessed, trudging up Boulder Lane. Her daughter, Francesca, walked behind. She also carried a suit case and a bundle. Occasionally she flashed a look of hatred back to the lights of West Haven, which place she had never loved.

Can this be Belle Rogers who brings up the procession, staggering under a heavy satchel and moaning and weeping as she stumbles along?

"I am glad I left word that I had gone out to spend the night," she said to herself. "At least, they won't know it for a while, and it will be too late then."

It was a long walk before they reached the end of Boulder Lane and found themselves on the beach of the little cove. The lights of the ship made a rippling, cheerful track on the water, but Belle shivered when she saw the black hull outlined in the darkness.

Several men were waiting for them near a boat, which had been moored on the beach, and presently the three women climbed in; their luggage was piled at one end and they were rowed away in the darkness. Two wagons came lumbering up the beach, and half the night, Belle, who was tossing feverishly in her stuffy berth, trying to stifle her sobs, heard the sailors loading a cargo, while the boats plied back and forth from the shore to the ship.

There was no wind that night and an ominous silence seemed to brood over the sea. At last in the stillness, Belle slept. Toward morning she was awakened by the sound of a voice. A man in a small boat just below her porthole was calling up to some one on deck.

"Hello, Captain, it's Ruiz. I'm coming aboard. We must sail by dawn. They've got word about

us. If that girl has turned traitor, she shall pay for it."

Belle could not hear the captain's reply, but he must have made some objection to sailing that morning, for the man named Ruiz answered:

"Storm or no storm, I'm master here, and I say we sail at once."

And sail they did without more argument. She could hear the sailors running about the ship. The masts creaked and groaned. Chains rattled. Presently the boat was in motion, and from her porthole she saw the familiar shores glide past her.

We cannot help pitying poor Belle in her misery and distress. She dragged herself from her berth—Fannie was still sleeping soundly—and put on her clothes. For the first time, she became aware of a sustained and ever-increasing sound. What she had mistaken in the beginning for the eternal noise of the waters, she recognized now as the wind. As she cast one long regretful look back to the shores of West Haven, which she had never really loved until now, the hurricane burst upon them with a roar like a thousand an-

gry beasts. The ship went scurrying through the harbor entrance in the teeth of the gale.

Belle hurried upstairs to the deck, pulling on her ulster as she ran. Not a vestige of curl had the wet air left in her light gold hair; but for the first time in her life, since she had been old enough to remember, she had forgotten that she had any hair and she did not even stop to push back the damp, uneven locks from her eyes.

The boat had cleared the Black Reefs and was making for the open sea, when suddenly the demon wind played a trick on the captain of the little schooner and changed its tack. Down went the mainmast with a great crash. Through the shrieking of the wind, Belle could hear the curses and cries of the sailors and the yells of the captain. Mme. Alta appeared, looking more than ever like a walrus, in her greasy old black dressing gown. Fannie ran up behind her, making a great outcry.

The hurricane seemed to lift the ship in its arms and carry it along. Then, with a hideous grinding noise, the vessel stood perfectly still.

Some one screamed:

“We’re on the rocks!”

And Belle knew without being told that they had tossed onto the Black Reefs.

* * * * *

“Wake up, Billie,” cried Nancy, shaking her friend’s shoulder violently. “Get up and dress. We are all waiting below.”

“What’s happened?” asked Billie, sitting up in bed and rubbing her eyes.

“A ship is wrecked on the Black Reefs.”

Billie leaped from her bed and began to dress hurriedly.

“It must be a fearful sight,” she exclaimed, as she pulled on her clothes. “The poor sailors, will they be saved?”

“I haven’t heard,” answered Nancy, “but the whole town is rushing up the Cliff Road.”

“Tell Ben to get ‘The Comet.’ He can run it as well as I can now.”

“He has,” answered Nancy, with the privilege of friendship. “I made him get it while I routed you out.”

In another five minutes “The Comet,” with its load of boys and girls,—only Mary and Percy

were missing,—was climbing Cliff Road in a driving hurricane of wind.

A straggling line of people hurried along the path toward the Life-Saving Station.

“Is that it?” demanded Billie breathlessly, when the car had come to a standstill opposite the light house.

“Yes,” replied Merry, looking through the glasses. “She doesn’t look much larger than a fishing smack from this distance, but she’s really a pretty big schooner and she’s in a bad fix, too. She has stuck right on the Serpent’s Fang, Ben. You remember that old fisherman showed it to us last summer when we were sailing? It’s a pointed rock that sticks up higher than the others and it looked to be a pretty fierce proposition to me.”

“The life-boat is being launched!” exclaimed Elinor.

They clutched each other in their excitement, while a boat, with six brave life-savers in it, leapt onto the crest of a big wave, only to be hurled back again.

"They'll have to use the gun," put in Charlie.
"They'll never make it in this sea."

"What do you mean?" shouted Billie. It was almost impossible to be heard now above the noise of the wind.

But before any one could shout back an explanation, her attention was claimed by a man in a long, thick ulster, buttoned to his chin, and a vizored cap pulled well over his eyes. He had come to the front of the motor car and, bowing to Billie politely, he stood on tiptoe and beckoned to her to lean down.

"You'll be surprised to hear that you have friends on that ship," he said in her ear, and she recognized Mr. Bangs.

"Friends?" she repeated, in amazement.

"Wait and see," he replied, as he moved away to join another man, who was leaning against a tree smoking a cigar.

"Look!" cried some one, and just as Billie shifted her gaze from the ship to the beach she saw a long black line shoot out over the water and light on the deck of the ship. It was very confusing then, what happened. There was a

great deal of shouting on shore and scurrying of sailors on the ship. Presently there seemed to be a double line of rope stretching out to the wreck.

After a long pause, Billie saw, creeping along one of the lines of rope, swaying and swinging almost to sea level, an object which appeared to be shaped like a pair of clumsy trouser legs with the head and shoulders of a human being above.

"It's a woman," cried Nancy, jumping up and down in her excitement, as she looked through the glasses. "It's—it's—"

"It's Mme. Alta," exclaimed Billie, as the woman was lifted onto the beach.

No one could explain why the music teacher should be found on a wrecked schooner, but Mr. Bangs and Billie exchanged meaning glances as Mme. Alta was supported into the Life-Saving Station.

The next time the buoy was drawn into shore it carried Fannie Alta, a shivering, wretched little figure, who followed her mother silently into the life-savers' house.

"Who can the third one be?" said Billie out loud, although she was speaking to herself. "Can it be——"

She jumped out of the car and ran down the path to the beach, followed by her three chums. As she passed Mr. Bangs, he caught her by the arm and said in her ear:

"The missing link."

No one but Billie and Mr. Bangs recognized Belle Rogers in the miserable object which now crawled out of the breeches buoy. Her face was blue and pinched with cold. Her damp hair hung in her eyes, and she moaned and sobbed most pitifully.

When she saw Billie, she flung her wet arms around the young girl's neck.

"Oh, forgive me! Forgive me!" she wept.

A crowd of people gathered around them.

Billie patted her on the shoulder.

"I do forgive you," she whispered, "and if you would rather not go into the station, we will take you home in 'The Comet.' "

"Any place but home," sobbed Belle, as Ben

threw his ulster around her shivering shoulders and Nancy wrapped a scarf about her head.

The others had now recognized the poor girl, and with a generous impulse they tried to shield her from the gaze of the villagers.

"Will you go to Cousin Helen's, then?" asked Belle, as they half carried her up the steep path.

"Yes," she answered, and in another ten minutes the miserable refugee was being tenderly ministered to at Billie's home by three of the most detested members of the Blue Bird Society.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BELLE'S CONFESSION.

Belle, looking still very unlike herself, lay in Billie's little brass bed, propped up on pillows.

"How can you and Miss Campbell be so kind to me," she was saying, "when you know how wicked I have been?"

"But you are sorry and that means everything," answered Billie, who was sitting on the side of the bed, feeding her hot beef tea.

"When are the others coming?" asked the invalid.

"They have come. I was just going to tell you after you had finished the tea. Shall I call them?"

Belle nodded, and presently Miss Gray and Mary Price came into the room.

The Principal took the sick girl's hand kindly.

"Speak out from the heart, Belle," she said,

"and don't be afraid. You will be much happier when you get it off your mind."

"I promise to, Miss Gray," replied Belle meekly, gazing miserably at Mary, who looked pale and ill.

Miss Gray sat in a judicial looking arm-chair; Mary, with closed eyes, lay on a lounge near the fire, and Billie seated herself on the foot of the bed.

"I suppose," began Belle, "it would be almost impossible for you to believe that a well brought up girl of decent family could be as wicked as I have been. When I finally realized what I had done I thought I would rather run away to South America with those terrible people than stay here and bear the shame of it all. But I thank heavens for the storm. The ship was not sailing for any good purpose. I feel sure of that.

"To begin at the beginning, perhaps you didn't know how angry I was when you joined the Blue Birds, Billie? I hope I shall never be angry again. I was ill from it and I lay on my bed all afternoon planning a revenge on all the Blue Birds, but you, especially. I think I must have

been insane with rage and mortification. I wanted to humiliate you, because I thought you had humiliated me before the whole school. I thought of dozens of ways of doing it, but the only plan that seemed good enough was to prove——”

She paused and bit her lip.

“To prove that you were—a—thief.”

There was a long silence. Nothing could be heard but the ticking of the little French clock on the mantel. Miss Gray had started and flushed crimson. She was only just now realizing what this confession must mean to the two girls.

“I asked Fannie Alta to help me because she was the only outsider in the class, but I never dreamed that she was a real thief, herself. She found out what it was I wanted her to do almost before I had half breathed it to myself, only she was afraid of Billie and put it on Mary. It was my twenty dollars she used, but we found the scheme didn’t work. Anyhow, she told it all over school and went so much farther than I had intended that I soon found myself too deeply involved to get out. She and her mother owned

me, body and soul. I had to take Fannie with me everywhere I went, even to Mrs. St. Clair's. I had to give her my clothes, and explain to mamma that she was my best friend. Her mother made me carry letters and messages back and forth. Once I had to go by myself all the way to Boulder Lane after dusk and meet a horrible creature who had only one eye and one arm. He gave me a letter for Mme. Alta. Another time I was to meet one of them, a man who helped him, up in the Sophomore class room of the High School. I didn't go, because there was such a mist."

Billie and Mary exchanged glances.

"He was the man who robbed us of the fifty dollars," said Billie.

"Then whose fifty dollars was it I got?" demanded Miss Gray.

"My monthly allowance," replied Billie.

"Foolish, foolish girls," said the Principal. "But it was my own fault. I blame no one else, and perhaps I wouldn't have believed the story just at that time."

"Then," continued Belle, "the most dreadful

thing of all happened. These people were always in need of money. Everything they had seemed to go to some object. The one-eyed man, who was Fannie's stepfather, was to get some high position in South America. She used to tell me what she was going to do when he was made Vice President, or something. When we went to the St. Clair's, Fannie was almost unbearable. She made me give her my dress and I had to wear hers, and she insulted me at every turn. But I didn't find out until after the party that her step-father had been there dressed as a ghost. He wanted to rob Mrs. St. Clair. It was Fannie who took the necklace. She was to go back later and give it to him, so that if her bag was searched the next morning, when the necklace was missed, it wouldn't be found. But she made me go back instead, after every one else was asleep, I supposed. It was terrible, when I found myself alone in the attic, with the necklace hidden under my wrapper. No one was there. The man must have been frightened and run away. Then I heard all of you come and I threw a sheet over me and hid in a far corner."

"It *was* you, then?" exclaimed Billie.

"Yes, and when I met you and Mary I had the necklace with me and I didn't think I had strength enough to get to my room. When we got home from Mrs. Ruggles' next day and I found Fannie had been sent to town, I knew something had happened. I thought perhaps she might have taken the necklace with her, but the next morning, when you and Mary left before breakfast, I was certain that one of you had been accused.

"You never can understand how I suffered. And yet it was what I had planned when I was so angry. Late Monday afternoon Mr. Bangs, a detective, came to see me. He wrote across his card 'Pierre Lafitte,' and I was convinced then that he knew everything."

"You did tell Fannie about the card that was in the box of jewels, then?"

Belle hung her head.

"Yes," she said, at last. "In the very beginning, before I had learned to loathe her and myself so, I told it to Fannie.

"After Mr. Bangs had left," she went on, "I

hurried as fast as I could to Mme. Alta's lodgings and told her that everything had been discovered. The husband came in while I was there and ordered her to leave at once. The ship was in the harbor, he said. I was ordered to go, too, and it really did seem best. I felt I should be disgraced if I stayed and I was too miserable to reason much, anyway. They were glad to go. They hated it here, and they were afraid to leave me, I suppose, for fear I would tell. Ever since they were almost caught in Smugglers' Cave, they have been very careful.

"I have made a great many people suffer," Belle went on, "Mary and Billie and Mrs. Price and Mrs. St. Clair, and I have suffered, too, perhaps more than any of you. But I have learned a great deal. I never knew before what a wicked, spoiled girl I was. Mamma and papa never denied me anything in my life. I have been indulged and petted until I have been nothing but a bundle of selfishness. When the ship was wrecked and we thought we were going to sink any minute the scales dropped entirely from my eyes and I saw myself as I really was. I knelt on the deck

and prayed and prayed for forgiveness until they came and told me it was my turn to be taken to shore.

"You will forgive me, won't you Mary? I will do everything I can to make up for the trouble and unhappiness I have caused you."

Belle stretched out her arms toward Mary and tears flowed down her cheeks and splashed on the coverlid.

Miss Gray wiped her eyes and Billie's face worked convulsively for a moment and she choked back a lump which would rise in her throat on occasions.

Mary came over and took Belle's hands.

"Of course I forgive you, Belle," she said, kissing the repentant girl on the lips.

"But I must ask your forgiveness, too, Mary," cried Miss Gray. "I feel I am not fit to be the principal of the High School to have so misjudged you. It was only the strange way you acted about the fifty dollars which made me credit for a moment the stories that were told."

When peace was entirely restored, Miss Gray took her departure. She did not return to the

High School, but hurried to the livery stable, where she ordered a carriage and had herself driven straight to Mrs. St. Clair's.

As Belle will not again appear in this story, you will perhaps be interested to know how sincere her reformation really was. Her mother and father scarcely recognized the pale, quiet girl who returned to them in another day. Her entire nature had been shaken by the experience, and for some time she was dazed and silent. But no one ever saw her angry again, and as if she wished to give some visible sign of her repentance, the red rubber curlers were thrown away and from that time she has worn her hair straight.

There was no evidence against Mme. Alta or Fannie, except what Belle Rogers could furnish, and they were finally allowed to go free. But they were not permitted to remain in quiet West Haven, where suspicious characters were not welcomed.

The police cared little for the music teacher and her daughter. The prize they looked for was Ruiz, the famous filibuster and desperado

who had smuggled hundreds of rifles into Venezuela and had robbed and pillaged and even killed, but had never been caught.

Detective Bangs, standing on the shore, the day of the shipwreck, scanned eagerly the face of each sailor as he was drawn ashore. But Ruiz was not among them. It was supposed that he preferred death to arrest; for he remained on the sinking ship. But the sturdy little vessel clung desperately to the Serpent's Fang until after sunset, and there are some who believe that Ruiz swam ashore with his one arm, which was as strong as iron, and is still at large somewhere working mischief and misfortune.

On the day after the departure of Mme. Alta and Fannie, Miss Gray called a meeting of the Faculty and pupils of West Haven High School. Mary Price was there and so was Billie, and in the gallery sat Mrs. Price between Mrs. St. Clair and Miss Campbell.

"I called this meeting," said Miss Gray, "because I wanted to make an announcement to all of you at once, since the subject of the announce-

ment concerns us all. We have recently had a very clever thief in our midst. She has robbed many of you and has brought unjust suspicion on some innocent persons by spreading reports. This girl has been dismissed from the school and from West Haven. She will never trouble us again.

“Some of us have suffered deeply for the last few weeks on account of this disgrace and scandal in the school, and I don’t mind confessing that I have been one of those persons. I know that you will all rejoice with me that the affair is concluded.

“I want to say further, that at a specially called meeting, the Board of Education has consented to add a new post to the school force. This position, which is that of private and confidential secretary to the principal and has a salary attached, is to be filled by Miss Mary Price. I hope you will all congratulate me on my good fortune in obtaining so competent and reliable an assistant.”

There was wild applause when this announce-

ment was made and Mary, smiling and happy, with her three devoted friends about her, was obliged to rise and bow her blushing acknowledgments to her schoolmates.

CHAPTER XXIV.

OUT OF THE MISTS.

The Motor Maids were gathered in Mrs. Brown's sunny parlor around a cheerful drift-wood fire. You may easily guess it was Saturday morning, because Nancy was darning stockings, Elinor was at the piano, Mary was reading, while Billie lay flat on her back on the hearth rug, her hands crossed under her head, thinking deeply.

"I wish people were not so careless of their diamond necklaces and things," she observed, addressing the ceiling with some irritation. "Throwing them around in motor cars, giving them to the first person who comes along, and not caring to have them returned! It's a nuisance——"

Suddenly the door was thrown violently open and Merry appeared.

"Mrs. Ruggles," he announced, making a low bow.

Nancy did not take the trouble to turn around. Elinor went on playing and Mary reading. It was only one of Merry's jokes, they thought. But Billie jumped up in amazement; for there actually stood Mrs. Ruggles in the flesh—very much in the flesh, in fact. She was dressed in decent black and wore a black bonnet, and Billie could not decide whether she resembled a queen disguised as a fish-wife or a fish-wife dressed as a lady.

"Why, it is Mrs. Ruggles," cried Nancy, glancing over her shoulder. "Merry plays so many jokes that we can never tell when he is in earnest and when he isn't. Do come in, Mrs. Ruggles. What brings you up to town so early?"

Mrs. Ruggles, who was slow of speech, did not reply at first. She moved into the room with the step of a grenadier and stood before Billie.

"Are you Miss Wilhelmina Campbell?" she asked.

"She is the same," put in Merry, "but she'll answer to the name of Billie."

Billie nodded and smiled. She was really too much engaged in admiring Mrs. Ruggles to reply to her question.

Nancy pushed up an arm-chair.

“Please sit down, Mrs. Ruggles, and perhaps you will have a cookie or a cup of tea.”

“No, Miss Nancy, I am not hungry and I couldn’t eat anyway, until I finished what I have to say.”

“That’s right, Mrs. Ruggles. Get it off your system. Are you going to scold Billie?” cried Merry.

“No, my boy. I’m going to thank her. She’s a fine young lady. I have just seen Miss Campbell and she has told me.”

“Told you what?” asked Billie.

“Told me that you have kept the box of jewels as you promised.”

“But——” began Billie, a dozen thoughts flashing through her mind at once in tumultuous confusion.

She saw again the face of the sick woman at Mrs. Ruggles’, her long hair spread over the pillow like a mantel of black and the troubled

dark eyes which gazed into hers for one brief moment.

"Then that was the automobile lady I saw in your bedroom?" she burst out.

"Yes," replied the old woman. "That was my daughter, Maria."

"Is Maria home again?" asked Elinor.

"I thought she had married a South American," said Nancy.

"Maria is now a singer," said Mrs. Ruggles proudly. "She has sung in Buenos Ayres and Paris, not in this country. Her husband was from Venezuela. He was very rich and he gave her many jewels. He loved her dearly for a few years, until he began to like something else better."

The old woman paused. It was extremely difficult for her to speak at such great length when she was so unaccustomed to talking at all.

"My daughter is very beautiful and very clever. She will be a great singer. He was jealous of her singing. He wished to be great, too, and he became a politician. Gradually he spent all of his money in making trouble for the gov-

ernment of his country. He wished to bring about a war and make himself a ruler. My son, my daughter's step brother, pushed him on. He was a bad boy, my only son. It is better that he should be dead. He was always in the thick of the fight. He couldn't keep away. His arm was shot off; his eye put out. But nothing could stop him."

"Was Ruiz really your son, John, who went away to sea so many years ago?" interrupted Nancy.

Mrs. Ruggles nodded.

"What happened next, Mrs. Ruggles?" demanded Billie.

"The next thing was that my Maria could not stand the life any longer. She came back to America with her jewels. They were all that was left of her husband's fortune and those he wanted so much that he threatened her many times. If he had wished to use them for a good purpose and not for rifles to kill innocent people, Maria would have given them gladly. But he was too clever for her, that man. He followed on a fast steamer and caught up with her before she could get to

me. He forced her to go with him in an automobile down the Shell Island road to meet John, my poor son, who was to take the jewels and sell them. Maria always carried her jewelry in a secret pocket inside of her skirt, but she had put it in a box that day and wrapped the box in her coat. Her husband did not know this. He thought she had it in the usual place. When they were upset going around a curve in the road my Maria was very seriously injured. She is still very lame. Her husband went away to get another car and you know the rest.

“When they found out in a few hours that she did not have the jewels they were very angry. She told them the truth: that she had given them to a young lady she had met, and asked her to take care of them. Although she did not have the name or address of this young lady, she knew they would be safe.”

“And Mr. Lafitte?” began Billie.

“He is an old friend, a lawyer who lives in Paris. She happened to have his card in her pocket. But he had just started to America and the letter she wrote, and your letter, came back

here. That is how I happened to get your name at last, Miss Wilhelmina. Mr. Lafitte was with my daughter yesterday."

"And what became of your son-in-law, Mrs. Ruggles?" asked Elinor.

"He died some weeks ago," replied Mrs. Ruggles. "He was accidentally shot with one of his own rifles, which exploded and killed him. My son had his body sent to us and we laid him to rest in the old Sabater burying ground, where all my family is buried. It is better that he should have died. He only made trouble while he lived, not only for poor Maria, but for his country, where many have been killed with the rifles he has smuggled in. He was a good man until he got in with those revolutionists. And my poor son, my poor John, how much sorrow he has brought us——"

Billie wondered if Mrs. Ruggles really knew the extent of her poor son's evil career. Perhaps she did, for the old woman's face twitched nervously for a moment and she covered her eyes with her hand, as if she wished to hide her unhappiness from the young girls.

"Maria and I are going away for a long time," she went on at last, with a rather shaky voice. "I will close the Inn. It is hard for me to leave home in my old age, but Maria wishes it, and it is better for me to be with her. Good-by and thank you," she said simply, rising and taking Billie's hand.

Billie stood on tiptoe and put her arms around Mrs. Ruggles' neck.

"Good-by, Mrs. Ruggles," she said. "I hope that your troubles are all over now and you and your daughter will be happy together."

The old woman wiped her eyes. She could not speak when she said good-by to the other girls, but silently handed Billie a little package and hurried away.

The package, when unwrapped, proved to be a small box containing a pretty gold filigree necklace. Written on a card inside was this message:

"With my love and gratitude. This is a simple little necklace my father brought me once from a voyage to the East. I am fond of it and

that is why I send it to you. Will you wear it sometimes and think of me? I shall never forget your kindness and loyalty.

“MARIA RUGGLES CORTINA.”

And now we have reached the end of our tale. Those troublous first months of Billie Campbell’s early school days in West Haven are changed into happy, quiet times, with plenty of study and plenty of play. All doubts and mysteries are cleared up, and the Motor Maids, wholesome, nice girls, are none the worse for their adventures.

It is in their beloved “Comet” that we see them last, flashing down Main Street toward the open country.

Billie, like the good pilot she is, is seated at the wheel, her fine gray eyes ever on the lookout. Nancy is bubbling over with laughter and gaiety. Elinor, on the back seat, holds herself as proudly as a queen, and little Mary, with a grave smile on her face, looks out across the fields, her clear eyes, deep as pools, holding and reflecting, as ever, the beauty from without intensified by the purity of the spirit within.

The friendship of these four school girls was of the quality that outlives a single season and many adventures. It held them together, in fact, so closely that they often found themselves planning for an indefinite future of partnership and mutual pleasures. That they realized their anticipations to some extent at least is assured, for the next volume of this series, "The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine," is a further account of their good times together.

THE END.

BOY AVIATORS' SERIES

By Captain Wilbur Lawton

Absolutely Modern Stories for Boys

Cloth Bound

Price, 50c per volume

The Boy Aviators in Nicaragua

Or, Leagued With Insurgents

The launching of this Twentieth Century series marks the inauguration of a new era in boys' books—the "wonders of modern science" epoch. Frank and Harry Chester, the Boy Aviators, are the heroes of this exciting, red-blooded tale of adventure by air and land in the turbulent Central American republic. The two brothers with their \$10,000 prize aeroplane, the GOLDEN EAGLE, rescue a chum from death in the clutches of the Nicaraguans, discover a lost treasure valley of the ancient Toltec race, and in so doing almost lose their own lives in the Abyss of the White Serpents, and have many other exciting experiences, including being blown far out to sea in their air-skimmer in a tropical storm. It would be unfair to divulge the part that wireless plays in rescuing them from their predicament. In a brand new field of fiction for boys the Chester brothers and their aeroplane seem destined to fill a top-notch place. These books are technically correct, wholesomely thrilling and geared up to third speed.

Sold by Booksellers Everywhere

HURST & CO. Publishers NEW YORK

BOY AVIATORS' SERIES

By Captain Wilbur Lawton

Absolutely Modern Stories for Boys

Cloth Bound

Price, 50c per volume

The Boy Aviators on Secret Service

Or, Working With Wireless

In this live-wire narrative of peril and adventure, laid in the Everglades of Florida, the spunky Chester Boys and their interesting chums, including Ben Stubbs, the maroon, encounter exciting experiences on Uncle Sam's service in a novel field. One must read this vivid, enthralling story of incident, hardship and pluck to get an idea of the almost limitless possibilities of the two greatest inventions of modern times—the aeroplane and wireless telegraphy. While gripping and holding the reader's breathless attention from the opening words to the finish, this swift-moving story is at the same time instructive and uplifting. As those readers who have already made friends with Frank and Harry Chester and their "bunch" know, there are few difficulties, no matter how insurmountable they may seem at first blush, that these up-to-date gritty youths cannot overcome with flying colors. A clean-cut, real boys' book of high voltage.

Sold by Booksellers Everywhere

HURST & CO. Publishers NEW YORK

